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THE EXCELLENCE OF THE AUTHORIZED VERSION

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IN 1611, the King James Version (or more properly, the Authorized Version) of the English Bible was first published. No other version of the Bible in English has ever equaled or even approached the influence, acceptance, and authority of the King James Version (KJV) among English-speaking peoples. The overall impact of the KJV during its 350-year reign as the standard English Bible is incalculable. As an accurate, authoritative translation of the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Word of God, it has guided the English church into all truth, taught us the whole counsel of God, and stood as a bulwark against false teachers and their heresies. As a magnificent work of English prose, its majestic language has shaped the way we worship God in our confessions of faith, our prayers, our psalms and hymns, our observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and our preaching. As a non-sectarian version, it established itself as the English Bible of all branches of the church in England and America. These prodigious accomplishments of the Authorized Version (AV) are due to the goodness of God in giving to His church such an excellent version of Holy Scripture. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to take a look at the excellence of the AV and some of the factors that caused it to become the most authoritative and widely used English version ever.

The Connection of the AV with Previous English Translations

The title page of the 1611 AV states that this Bible is “Newly translated out of the original tongues: and with the former translations diligently compared and revised by his Majestie’s special commandment.” This statement indicates that the AV, while being ultimately based on the original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, draws on the wisdom and work of the preceding English translations of Scripture. The AV is the final product of the work of the Reformers of translating the Bible into English and incorporates into one excellent version the best of Tyndale’s translation, “Matthew’s Bible,” the Great Bible, the Bishops’ Bible, and the Geneva Bible. The translators of the AV stated in their preface, “Truly (good Christian Reader) we never thought from the beginning, that we should need make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one...but to make a good one¹ better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against; that hath been our mark.”

In time, the aspirations of the AV translators were realized, and the AV came to be recognized as the best English version of the Bible (i.e., the “one principal good one”). Regarding this triumph of the AV over the earlier English versions of the Bible, Sir Frederic Kenyon, former director of the British Museum, explains that

The causes of its superiority are not hard to understand. In the first place, Greek and Hebrew scholarship had greatly increased in England during the forty years which had passed since the last revision...Secondly, the revision was the work of no single man and of no single school. It was the deliberate work of a large body of trained scholars and divines of all classes and opinions, who had before them, for their guidance, the labours of nearly a century of revision...Thirdly, the past forty years had been years of extraordinary growth in English literature. Prose writers and poets—Spenser, Sidney, Hooker, Marlowe, Shakespeare, to name only the greatest—had combined to spread abroad a sense of literary style and to raise the standard of literary taste. Under the influence, conscious or unconscious, of masters such as these, the revisers wrought out the fine material left them by Tyndale and his successors into the splendid monument of Elizabethan prose which the Authorised Version is universally admitted to be...The English of the Authorised Version is the finest specimen of our prose literature at a time when English prose wore its stateliest and most majestic form.²

In their discussion of the AV and why it became “the most influential single translation of the English Bible that the Protestants were to produce,” Geisler and Nix give us further insight on why the AV was able to displace all previous versions:

The reasons for the gradual but overwhelming success of the Authorized Version have been well stated by several writers and may be briefly summarized as follows:

1. The personal qualifications of the revisers, who were the choice scholars and linguists of their day as well as men of profound and unaffected piety;
2. The almost universal sense of the work as a national effort, supported wholeheartedly by the king, and with the full concurrence and approval of both church and state;
3. The availability and accessibility of the results of nearly a century of diligent and unintermittent labor in the field of biblical study, beginning with Tyndale and Purvey rather than Wycliffe, and their efforts to “make a good translation better”;
4. The congeniality of the religious climate of the day with the sympathies and enthusiasm of the translators, as the predominant interest of the age was theology and religion;

¹ The “good one” that is being referred to here is the Geneva Bible. Daniell states: “That this refers to the Geneva Bible—though for political reasons it could not be stated—is clear from the fact that, whenever in that long preface of the 1611 AV the Bible is quoted (fourteen times), the authors do not do so from their own translation, nor from the Bishops’, but from Geneva. Moreover, though nowhere do they acknowledge it, they took over a great deal of Geneva’s text verbatim; in doing so they were taking over much of Tyndale, though they clearly went directly to him as well.” *Tyndale’s New Testament*, Translated from the Greek by William Tyndale (1534) in a modern-spelling edition and with an introduction by David Daniell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), xiii.

² Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941), 232-233.

5. The organized system of cooperative work which followed the precedent of the Geneva translators, while it may have been improved, resulted in a unity of tone in the Authorized Version which surpassed all its predecessors;
6. The literary atmosphere of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries paralleled the lofty sense of style and artistic touch of the translators...the quality of the work needs no commendation at this late date. It reigns supreme as the “intrinsically” authorized version of English-speaking Protestantism.³

The Translation of the AV

The AV was translated by a team of scholars who were noted in their day for their piety and scholarship. The translation of the AV was carried out by all the “principal learned men” of the kingdom of England.⁴ But they were not only learned, they were also godly men who presupposed the truth of Scripture; hence, they were Christian scholars, and their faith had a deep impact on their work. As Brown states, “They were indeed ‘learned men’—and their scholarship was accompanied by a deep conviction of the Divine origin of the records which they were translating. Learning and faith went hand in hand to open the storehouse of God’s Word of Truth for the spiritual enrichment of millions...”⁵ Concerning the qualifications of the translators and the effect the time in which they lived had on their work, G. W. and D. E. Anderson give the following analysis:

The Authorised Version was translated by the best scholars of the day, but men whose lives also reflected a firm conviction that every word they were translating was true, inspired by God Himself. These men lived at a time when theology was not so flexible and so influenced by philosophies which demand that nothing is true and everything must be judged by standards established by the world. God in His providence moved the events of the early seventeenth century to ensure that the accepted English translation of His Word would be free of the unsound philosophies that would plague theology in the next three hundred years.⁶

The translators of the AV based their translation of the NT on the *Textus Receptus* (TR), for to them this text was in fact the authentic providentially preserved text. Furthermore, due to their belief in verbal inspiration, they were careful to translate according to the formal equivalent (FE)⁷ method. These facts are admirably summarized by the Andersons:

[T]he Greek Received Text, upon which the New Testament of the Authorised Version is based, was produced at a time when men accepted the Bible as the inspired, errorless Word of the living God; whether working on the Greek text itself, or translating that text into English or any other language, they treated it as the very Word of God...With this basis, the Authorised Version translators entered into the work to which God, through King James, had called them. Because they were translating the very Word of God, they translated as much as possible word-for-word, producing a literal rendition of the Greek. They based the English Old Testament upon the Hebrew Masoretic Text, using ancient translations of the Hebrew as aids when the Hebrew was obscure, but remembering that these were translations only, and not the language into which God had given His Word to the people of Israel. The Authorised Version translators continued in the textual tradition which the Church had used and accepted for hundreds of years. In doing so, they continued the solidarity of both language texts and also of earlier English translations, upon which they based their work.⁸

The translators of the AV were zealous to give the English church an authoritative translation of God’s Word. To achieve this, they knew that they must render the original Hebrew and Greek as carefully and exactly as possible because the authority of a translation is based on its adherence to the words that the Holy Spirit used to reveal God’s truth to men. One of the means they employed to achieve this exactness and authority was to place in italics any words used in their translation that were not actually in the original. Jakob van Burggen, commenting on this aspect of the AV, asserted,

To a large extent, the KJV owes its authority to the rule that most inserted words were printed in italics. The Bible reader was thus able to see how carefully the translators treated God’s Word. They were afraid to add even one word, but if they were not able to translate without adding a word for the sake of clarity, they indicated that it had been added.⁹

This fidelity of the AV to the original texts of Scripture and the excellence of English rendering of these texts are strongly affirmed by Joseph Philpot:

We cannot but admire the great faithfulness of our translators in so scrupulously¹⁰ adhering to the exact words of the Holy Spirit, and when they were necessarily compelled to supply the ellipses¹¹ in the original, to point out that they had done

³ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 420-421.

⁴ Gustavus S. Paine, *The Learned Men* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1959), 13.

⁵ Terence H. Brown, “The Learned Men,” in *Which Bible?*, ed. David Otis Fuller, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1975), 23-24.

⁶ G. W. Anderson and D. E. Anderson, *The Authorised Version: What Today’s Christian Needs to Know about the KJV* (London: The Trinitarian Bible Society), 7.

⁷ **formal equivalent method** – in the FE method, the basic unit of translation is the word; accordingly, FE is a word-for-word translation. This means that FE seeks to translate each Hebrew and Greek word into its closest English equivalent. In FE translations, the translator attempts to parallel as closely as possible the wording and grammatical structure of the original Hebrew and Greek; he seeks to render nouns by nouns, verbs by verbs, etc.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁹ Jakob van Bruggen, *The Future of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1978), 136-137.

¹⁰ **scrupulously** – diligently, thoroughly, and extremely attentive to details.

so by marking the word in italic characters. By so doing, they engaged themselves, as by bond, to give the Word of God in its strict original purity; and yet, as thorough scholars in the original tongues, and complete masters of their own, they were enabled to give us a version admirable not only for its strict fidelity, but also for its eloquence, grandeur, and beauty.¹²

The excellence of the AV is not the result of chance, but rather it is due to God's providence that brought together an unsurpassed team of Christian scholars who were committed to biblical orthodoxy; who were seeking to build on the previous labors of William Tyndale and the Geneva Bible; who considered the TR and the Masoretic text to be the true providentially preserved texts of Scripture; and who believed that verbal inspiration required a careful word-for-word translation.

The Language of the AV

One of the leading criticisms against the AV is its "archaic" language, but those who make such criticisms do not understand the nature of the AV nor the issues involved. The language of the AV is not simply beautiful Elizabethan prose; it is also a kind of "biblical English," and therefore timeless and unique. The abandonment of the AV for a modern English version leaves us with an English Bible that is here today, gone tomorrow.¹³ The excellence of the AV is seen in the enduring quality of its biblical English. Regarding this, R. J. Rushdoony maintains,

One of the charges consistently leveled against the King James Version is that its language is archaic and obsolete. The answer is a simple one: it is intended to be. In 1611, the King James Version was as "out of date" as it is today. Compare the writings of Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, King James I, and John Lyly with the King James Version, and this becomes quickly apparent. The translators *avoided* the speech of their day for a basic English which would be simple, timeless, and beautiful; and they succeeded. Their version spoke outside their age and tradition with elemental simplicity. Their wisdom here exceeds that of their successors. Nothing seems more ridiculous than an outdated "modern" translation.¹⁴

Rushdoony continues:

The issue is not that the Bible should speak our everyday language, for this involves debasement, but that it should be *understandable*, and here, all arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, the King James speaks a language which, while sometimes difficult because the matter itself is so, is more often simple, clear-cut, and beautiful.¹⁵

Edward Hills gives this perspective on the language of the AV:

[T]he English of the King James Version is not the English of the early 17th-century. To be exact, it is not a type of English that was ever spoken anywhere. It is biblical English, which was not used on ordinary occasions even by the translators who produced the King James Version...Even in their use of *thee* and *thou* the translators were not following 17th-century English usage but biblical usage, for at the time these translators were doing their work these singular forms had already been replaced by the plural *you* in polite conversation.¹⁶

Therefore, the fact that the language of the AV seems at times unfamiliar to us is due not so much to the use of certain "archaic" words, but to the fact that its language is actually a kind of biblical English that results from the AV being a formal equivalent (FE) translation that seeks to retain as much of the Hebrew and Greek form as possible. In their desire to have the Bible in "the language of today" the modern dynamic equivalent (DE)¹⁷ translations set aside the form of the biblical languages and leave us with a translation that will be "out of date" in a relatively short period of time. But the language of the AV is in a sense timeless, and it has an "enduring diction which will remain as long as the English language remains, in other words, throughout the foreseeable future."¹⁸

The Heritage of English Christianity and the AV

There are many ways in which the use of the AV has benefited and blessed the English-speaking church. One of these ways is that it has provided a consistent and unchanging literary standard that links modern English-speaking Christians to their forebearers and forefathers in the faith. Those who use a modern translation often have trouble reading the Puritans, the splendid English creeds, the metrical Psalms, and the great hymns of past generations because the language is not familiar to them. Furthermore, the works (sermons, commentaries, etc.) of the past were largely based on the AV. Therefore,

¹¹ **ellipses** – the omissions from speech or writing of a word or words.

¹² Joseph C. Philpot, "The Authorized Version—1611," in *True or False?*, ed. David Otis Fuller (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1973), 21.

¹³ This is because the language of a modern version can no longer be considered sufficiently "modern" with the passing of a few years! According to the presuppositions of the dynamic equivalent method of translation, all of the modern translations will either have to be revised (endlessly!), or else be consigned to the shelf as an historical curiosity and new translations made to take their place.

¹⁴ Rousas J. Rushdoony, "Translation and Subversion," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 12 (1989), 12-13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Edward F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 4th ed. (Des Moines: The Christian Research Press, 1984), 218.

¹⁷ **dynamic equivalence** – a philosophy of translation that does not seek to be a *literal* translation of the original text of Scripture. In DE, the primary concern of the translator, regarding the modern reader, is to convey the *meaning* of the original rather than to transfer the *words* of the original. According to the presuppositions of this method, the "dynamic" is in the meaning of the text and not in the words or grammatical form of the text.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

those who abandon the AV for a modern language version begin effectively to cut themselves off from the great heritage of English Christianity. Regarding this the Andersons state,

Falling into disuse also are the great creeds which reflect the true Christianity of the Reformation. To those familiar with the Authorised Version, the phrasing of the creeds of the Apostles and Nicea, the great Westminster and London and other confessions—indeed, all the works of our forefathers in the faith—are splendid aids in understanding the Scriptures. But to those who have abandoned the Authorised Version, these as well as the thousands of Bible dictionaries, concordances, encyclopaedias, commentaries, word studies and lexicons are often closed books, as are the works of the Puritans, of Luther and Calvin, of the Hodges and Spurgeon and all of the other great men of God, whose lives displayed a holiness and piety which the lives of modern writers—and modern Christians—so often lack.”¹⁹

The Importance, Virtue, and Influence of the AV

In 1881, the Revised Version of the Bible appeared. It was claimed that the Revised Version was a revision of the AV, when in fact, it was really a new translation based not on the TR but on a new Greek text constructed by Westcott and Hort. John William Burgon vigorously defended the TR and the AV against this Revised Version. In the course of his defense, he noted the excellence of the AV and its importance to English-speaking Christians. Burgon said,

Whatever may be urged in favour of Biblical Revision, it is at least undeniable that the undertaking involves a tremendous risk. Our Authorized Version is the one religious link which at present binds together ninety millions of English-speaking men scattered over the earth’s surface. Is it reasonable that so unutterably precious, so sacred a bond should be endangered, for the sake of representing certain words more accurately—here and there translating a tense with greater precision—getting rid of a few archaisms? It may be confidently assumed that no ‘Revision’ of our Authorized Version, however judiciously executed, will ever occupy the place in public esteem which is actually enjoyed by the work of the Translators of 1611—the noblest literary work in the Anglo-Saxon language. We shall in fact never have *another* ‘Authorized Version.’²⁰

Burgon’s complaint concerning the total failure of the revisionists to improve on the AV could also be applied in some ways to the failure of modern revisions of the AV and of modern Bible versions to improve on the AV. Burgon states,

They had a noble Version [i.e., the AV] before them, which they have contrived to spoil in every part. Its dignified simplicity and essential faithfulness, its manly grace and its delightful rhythm, they have shown themselves alike unable to imitate and unwilling to retain. Their queer uncouth phraseology and their jerky sentences...are sorry substitutes for the living freshness, and elastic freedom, and habitual fidelity of the grand old Version which we inherited from our Fathers, and which has sustained the spiritual life of the Church of England, and of all English-speaking Christians, for 350 years.²¹

Joseph Philpot also believed that the AV was an excellent and faithful translation of the Scriptures. In addition to this, he saw that the AV was a bulwark of the Protestant faith and that it is our duty as English-speaking Christians to defend it and pass it on to our children. In a day in which the Word of God is being increasingly set aside and the Faith is being undermined on every side, we ought to consider carefully the wisdom and the warning contained in his words:

The present English Bible (Authorized Version) has been blessed to thousands of the saints of GOD; and not only so, it has become part of our national inheritance which we have received unimpaired from our fathers, and are bound to hand down unimpaired to our children. It is, we believe, the grand bulwark of Protestantism; the safeguard of the Gospel, and the treasure of the Church; and we should be traitors in every sense of the word if we consented to give it up to be rifled by the sacrilegious hands of the Puseyites,²² concealed papists, German Neologian,²³ infidel divines,²⁴ Arminians, Socinians,²⁵ and the whole tribe of enemies of God and godliness.²⁶

The AV is a bulwark of the Protestant faith because it upholds the essential biblical doctrines of verbal inspiration and providential preservation by providing the church with an accurate FE translation of the providentially preserved Hebrew and Greek texts. The AV is not a shifting standard; its faithful translation of the Masoretic text and the TR stands firm against all the changing theories of men concerning the nature of language, communication, and textual criticism. The AV is a bulwark of the Protestant faith because it gives English-speaking Christians a faithful and trustworthy translation of God’s unchanging Word. The same cannot be said of the modern versions that are based on the modern critical texts and dynamic equivalence (DE). Being grounded in false presuppositions concerning the translation of the biblical text, the modern versions do not lift up an unchanging standard, but instead they give us translations that are tossed to and fro by every wind of

¹⁹ Anderson and Anderson, *The Authorised Version*, 9.

²⁰ John W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (Paradise, PA: Conservative Classics, reprint, nd), 113.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

²² **Puseyites** – name given to a the 19th century Anglo-Catholic movement in the Church of England; named for Edmund B. Pusey, who adopted Roman Catholic views of sacramentalism, especially baptismal regeneration; also known as *Tractarians* and the *Oxford Movement*.

²³ **German Neologian** – German theologians who introduced new doctrines that overthrew supernatural or revealed religion.

²⁴ **Infidel divines** – theologians who at heart were unbelievers, skeptical of the supernatural.

²⁵ **Socinians** – those who followed the teaching of Socinius and denied the deity of Christ, original sin, predestination, and the substitutionary atonement of Christ and taught salvation by works.

²⁶ Philpot, “The Authorized Version—1611,” 23.

opinion concerning what represents the “best available” text of Scripture and what is the appropriate “dynamic equivalence” of the meaning of Scripture.²⁷

The importance of the AV and its influence on the English-speaking church can hardly be overstated; only eternity will be able to measure the impact that this excellent version has had on the millions of people for whom the AV was the Word of God in English. Frederic Kenyon provides us with an admirable summary of the greatness and influence of the AV:

The influence of the Authorized Version, alike on our religion and our literature, can never be exaggerated. Not only in the great works of our theologians, the resonant prose of the seventeenth-century Fathers of the English Church, but in the writings of nearly every author, whether of prose or verse, the stamp of its language is to be seen...But great as has been the literary value of the Authorized Version, its religious significance has been greater still. For nearly three centuries it has been the Bible, not merely of public use, not merely of one sect or party, not even of a single country, but of the whole nation and of every English-speaking country on the face of the globe. It has been the literature of millions who have read little else, it has been the guide of conduct to men and women of every class in life and of every rank in learning and education...It was the work, not of one man, nor of one age, but of many labourers, of diverse and even opposing views, over a period of ninety years. It was watered with the blood of martyrs, and its slow growth gave time for the casting off of imperfections and for the full accomplishment of its destiny as the Bible of the English nation.²⁸

The AV is truly an excellent English version of Holy Scripture. In the providence of God, it has served as the standard English Bible for over 350 years. It is an enduring version because it is based on the providentially preserved original texts of Holy Scripture, and it is translated according to the theologically sound FE method. And although there are scores of new English translations that are being aggressively marketed by publishing firms with slick advertising campaigns, and although modern scholarship heaps its scorn on the AV, the AV is still used and loved by millions of Christians worldwide, and no doubt it will be so used for many more years to come. In fact, I believe that there will be an increasing return to the AV among English-speaking people as Christians begin to tire of the endless stream of “new and more accurate” translations and the continuous “updating” and revisions of versions that only a few years ago were being touted as being “in the language of today”;²⁹ as Christians realize that the current Bible publishing industry is not theologically motivated or Holy Spirit driven to uphold the verbal inspiration and providential preservation of Scripture, but rather profit-motivated and market-driven; as Christians wake up to the fact that modern versions in their zeal to make the Scriptures “more understandable,” have often distorted the Word of God and have led to the “dumbing down” of the church;³⁰ as Christians see the appalling effect of having a church where no two members carry the same translation; as Christians grasp the fact that the modern versions have rejected the Greek text received by the church and by the Reformers as being the infallible Word of God and are based instead on a Greek text that was constructed by the majority vote of scholars using naturalistic Enlightenment methods of textual criticism; as Christians begin to understand that it is more important to know exactly what God said in Scripture than what a translator thinks God meant by what He said (even if it does require more effort on their part); and as Christians, by the grace of God, have a desire to return to the purity of God’s Word in English as given to them in the AV. Truly, in regard to English versions of the Bible, “The old is better” (Luk 5:39).



²⁷ For example, the NIV translation committee now believes that changes in American language and culture require a new gender inclusive language edition of the NIV. The fact that this new edition so blatantly distorts the actual wording of the original Hebrew and Greek matters little to them because they have bought into the false humanistic presuppositions of the DE theory of translation. For a discussion and review of this new NIV edition, see G. W. Anderson and D. E. Anderson, “The New International Version: Inclusive Language Edition,” *Quarterly Review* 534 (January to March 1996), 6-13.

²⁸ Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 233-234.

²⁹ This continuous flood of new translation also has the insidious effect of weakening the authority of Scripture. As van Bruggen explains, “[N]othing is more damaging to the authority of Scripture than for readers to think, ‘It is only a translation, tomorrow there will be a new one.’” *The Future of the Bible*, 136.

³⁰ Is it not ironic that with the proliferation of all the modern language versions that are supposed to make the Bible “more understandable” and are supposed to increase readership that there is such a neglect of serious Bible reading and study and that there is such a theological ignorance in the average evangelical Christian as we see today? There is a serious price to pay when the Bible is made more understandable than it is in the original Hebrew and Greek, and when people are deceived into thinking that the difficulty of Bible study is simply due to the “archaic” language of the AV, and that all they need is a modern Bible that reads like today’s newspaper. Proverbs 2:1-5 makes it clear that if one expects to understand the Word of God and find the knowledge of God, they must be willing to put forth the necessary effort and labor. The advertising claims of modern versions virtually deny Proverbs 2:1-5 and tell Christians that all they need to make God’s Word understandable is their new translation. Note, for example, the presumptuous claims of World Bible publishers concerning their new translation, *God’s Word* (1995): “Now no interpretation needed. The Bible: the all-time bestseller—but hardly the best understood. *God’s Word*, the revolutionary new translation that allows you to immediately understand exactly what the original writers meant.” Such claims as these are shameful (but the logical result of the DE philosophy of translation) and ought to be vigorously opposed by the church.