

*“William Tyndale and the King James Bible:  
A good translation made better”*

*This paper, poor as it is, is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Jane Curran, whose wit and philosophical understanding and whose love of learning and language has meant so much to the lives of all who have been privileged to know her. She knew about the Word that underlies all words.*

*“Translation it is that 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 to the water....”*so Miles Smith in his *Translators to the Readers* states at the outset of one of the most outstanding and most influential works of translation in human history, the King James Bible, words whose earthy pithiness capture the genius of William Tyndale. It is his translation of the Christian Scriptures that provides the ground of the celebrated King James Bible. The Preface, as it is commonly known, is actually a kind of apology for translation – that alone is remarkable in itself.

Translation matters, indeed, it is not too much to say that translation is an integral feature of the Judeo-Christian heritage and one which has its roots in antiquity. The Preface to the King James Bible actually provides as an argument of justification for its enterprise the fact that in the early seventeenth century there are *“of one and the same book of Aristotle’s Ethicks ... extant not so few as six or seven several translations.”* It is an intriguing and interesting argument especially at a time when the arguments against Aristotelianism, particularly in what early moderns called ‘natural philosophy’, would outweigh apologetic arguments for Aristotelian physics and, by extension, metaphysics. This is but one of the many paradoxes of the King James Bible. Sometimes called the Authorised Version, it defends itself in part on the basis of multiple translations of the Bible already in existence about which, too, it shows a remarkable generosity of spirit; to wit, *“[W]e do not deny, nay, we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in **English**, set forth by men of our profession ... containeth the word of God, nay, is the Word of God...”*

The paradox is even greater when you consider that the *Ethicks* of Aristotle along with so many more of the works of the Aristotelian corpus came into the West by way of the Muslim Arabic scholars of the Iberian peninsula, themselves part of the religious tradition of Islam where there can be, in principle, no translation of the Qu’ran. Translation matters, but in very different ways, it seems.

A veritable library of books dealing with the King James Version of the Bible has appeared over the last decade and a half. Alistair McGrath’s *In the Beginning*, Benson Bobrick’s *Wide as the Waters*, and Adam Nicolson’s *God’s Secretaries*, for instance – all witness to a revival of interest and scholarly appreciation for the remarkable

achievement of the King James Bible, even before the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations got underway, which have brought out even more shelves of books; to take but one as an example, David Crystal's *Begat*. There is the enterprising and ingenious publishing endeavor of *The Pocket Canons*, undertaken in 1998, in which individual books of the Bible in the King James Version have been published in small volumes (each 4 1/8" by 5 5/8" in size) provided with, get this, introductions by a wide range of literary, philosophical, and religious figures. It is a truly amazing enterprise.

The range of writers in that project is remarkable. They include such figures as P.D. James writing on *The Acts of the Apostles* – an interesting twist on the genre of the whodunit; Charles Frazier of the novel *Cold Mountain*, now a movie, writing about another struggle of epic proportions, the struggles of *Job*; the novelist, non-fiction and short-story writer Doris Lessing on *Ecclesiastes*; the author, poet, journalist and literary critic *par excellence* of *The Spectator* and the *Sunday Times*, Peter Ackroyd on the *Book of Isaiah*; the Dalai Lama on the Epistles of *James, Peter, John* and *Jude*; novelist Joanna Trollope on the books of *Ruth* and *Esther*; the mystery writer Ruth Rendell on *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*; Karen Armstrong, famed for, among other things, *The History of God*, writing on *The Letter to the Hebrews*; Thomas Cahill, author of such books as *The Gift of the Jews*, *The Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, *How the Irish Saved Civilisation*, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*, and *Mysteries of the Middle Ages*, writing on *The Gospel according to John*; and, without exhausting the list of writers but bringing it to some sort of finale, last but not least, singer and writer, humanitarian and activist, Paul David Hewson, better known as *Bono* of the rock-band *U2*, writing, appropriately enough, on the *Psalms*!

David was for him like a rock star. Words and music – a sense of the aural power of words proclaimed and heard – have a kind of hold on the soul. As Bono puts it, "*words and music*" did for him "*what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do, they introduced me to God*", though not necessarily to "*belief in God*" but "*more [to] an experiential sense of God*". Growing up in Ireland during "*the troubles*", the son of a Protestant mother and a Catholic father, he makes the entertaining observation that "*the Prods had the better tunes and the Catholics had the better stage-gear*"!

It is enough, almost, to save the Bible from the biblical scholars. For what this publishing endeavor illustrates is precisely the strong hold that the King James Bible has on the literary imagination of writers and artists who have been compelled to recognize its enormous influence in the shaping of English literature even, and, perhaps, especially, far beyond the bounds of that "*royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle*" – England.

It is a modern 'market' testimony to the hold of the King James Bible on the literary imagination. The writer Doris Lessing captures best and most ironically the meaning of the very thing we celebrate, the power of the Word in the King James Bible translation which has shaped so much of the English speaking world, and, as she suggests,

precisely because of its aural qualities. Not just what is written but what is proclaimed. There really isn't an app for this yet, I have to say!

Writing an introduction to the most philosophical of the books of the Old Testament, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, she admits that before the request she had not read it - not unlike many clergy, I suppose, except that, at least, she admitted it. She remembered, however, a remark of her father recalling a time when going to Church was a community and social requirement and where Sunday, "*was like a great black hole every week, but... listening to the prose of the Bible and the prayer book ... taught him to love language and good literature.*" "*The thunderous magnificence of this prose*", as she puts it, captures souls. It is one of the paradoxes of our age. Some of the strongest defenders in our own times, apologists in their own right, we might say, have little interest in the very doctrinal features that produced the King James Bible; for them it is a literary work; for the translators and others, it was something altogether religious and theological. The agenda was not aesthetic but theological. Our contemporary appreciations, such as they are, stand at some remove from the original spirit of the enterprise. It was profoundly religious and theological; it is, we might say, rhetoric at the service of revelation.

We meet to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King James Bible, a translation of the Scriptures into English, published and issued in 1611 and, perhaps, as late as February 1612, thus providing a reason, if we needed one, for our gathering today. The King James Bible is a remarkable achievement. No other literary work has exercised as much influence on the formation and shape of the English language as the King James Bible.

Yet what we celebrate is really the largely unsung yet unmistakable witness of William Tyndale. Over 80% - some say 90% - of the New Testament and large and major portions of the Old Testament are from Tyndale. The committees of the King James Bible had the wisdom, for the most part, to keep many of Tyndale's phrases and rhythms and words. On occasion there were improvements; on other occasions a kind of pedantry about scholarly meaning at the expense of his lively and memorable expression, sometimes reverting to more Latinate words and phrases; but overall, there is a respectful acknowledgement of Tyndale's genius. Yet, not a word of credit or acknowledgement of Tyndale by name.

Tyndale, in many ways, is the unsung hero of the translation of the Scriptures into English which, through the King James Bible, has shaped the English language more than any other work. We forget this at our peril. We forget Tyndale to our shame.

David Crystal argues in his book "*Begat*", that it has quantitatively influenced the English language more than any other single source, to the tune of some 269 definitive examples, as he labours to show (mostly through Internet research). Much of that is Tyndale, of course, and much of it, too, is conveyed through the further association between the King James Version of the Bible and the Books of Common Prayer, that

have somehow been the conduits of culture and spirituality in almost equal measure throughout the English-speaking world.

This year, 2012, marks the 350th anniversary of the mother prayer book of the Anglican Communion, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The Prayer Book is largely comprised of scripture but in 1662, with the exception of the Psalter which remained Coverdale's version, all the Epistles and Gospels were changed from earlier English translations to that of the King James Bible, making the 1662 Prayer Book and its subsequent descendents another major conduit for the influence of the King James Bible on the English speaking world, particularly with respect to the New Testament.

The Calendar of the Book(s) of Common Prayer recognizes William Tyndale as a "*Translator of the Scriptures into English, Martyr, 1536.*" This both reveals and conceals a whole story and an important concept. A translator of the Scriptures into English and a martyr? To be sure.

Some of the greatest achievements of the Anglican witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ are precisely about the connection between language and martyrdom. William Tyndale inaugurates a fateful tradition belonging to a fateful century. Tyndale, Cranmer, and Latimer – all of them great masters of the word in English; two of them as translators and one as a preacher – all of them martyrs. There are others, too, of course, who were martyred in that age when politics was religion and religion was politics; all of which is hard, if not impossible, for us to understand. Yet, there is this wonderful idea that we cannot ignore, I think, namely, the power of translation as a witness to truth and beauty.

In the second century BC, the only named author of one of the apocryphal books, *Ecclesiasticus*, or *The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach*, comments in the prologue the problem of translation.

*"For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language."*

Far from leading to a sense of despair or denial about the art of translation, this straightforward acknowledgement of the challenge of translation becomes a distinctive feature of the Jewish and Christian biblical traditions revealing a profoundly intellectual concept. What is it? Simply this, ideas expressed in one language can be conveyed into other languages, even if they don't "*have exactly the same sense*" as the original. For the Greeks who saw all non-Greek speakers as '*barbarians*'; for the Hebrews who bequeathed the label of '*Philistines*' to all who are uncultured, this is an important spiritual and intellectual development.

Ideas are not simply the property of any one language or culture however much there is the struggle and the challenge to find the right words to capture the fullest possible meaning in the transition from one language and culture to another. The point is that not all translation traduces or betrays the original; there is a kind of confidence in *logos*,

both reason and word, we might say, that transcends the barriers of culture and language inherent in the idea of translation. There is the Word behind the words. Ideas matter. Words matter. Getting the words right is the task of the translator.

The Venetian painter, Vittore Carpaccio, was commissioned in 1502 to paint a series of paintings for the *Scuola Di San Giorgio Degli Schiavoni*, a school founded by Slavs from Dalmatia for their immigrant community in Venice. Among the series was a depiction of the *Life of Jerome*, the great translator of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into Latin. About his influence and significance there is no debate; the images and representations of Jerome in art are legion and much is made of his labours in the Preface to the King James Bible. Apart from the odd statue, window and commemorative plaque here and there the same cannot be said of Tyndale; not even a mention in the Preface!

Carpaccio's series of the Life of St. Jerome, the greatest translator of all time, we might say, whose Vulgate was the *lingua franca* of Europe for more than a thousand years, comprises three paintings; Jerome with his legendary lion as companion; Jerome's death and funeral; and then, overshadowing all else, a depiction of St. Augustine pausing in the midst of writing to receive, it seems, a vision of Jerome's death and ascension into heaven. They were contemporaries.

Two decades after Carpaccio's painting, Tyndale, a gifted linguist, undertook to translate the Scriptures into English. It marks a kind of turning point: a move away from the Latin Vulgate of Jerome and a turn to the vernacular languages of early modern Europe. It is signalled by Luther's 1534 Deutsche Bible and by William Tyndale's translations into English of the New Testament in 1526 and again in 1534 along with translations of the Old Testament which ultimately found their way into Matthew's Bible (1536), the Great Bible (1539), and seventy-two years later into the King James Bible (1611).

But Tyndale's work of translation into English and for the English was not produced in England but on the continent. Translation was viewed with considerable suspicion, a threat to those in power, a challenge to the *status quo* because it calls into question the basis of authority about matters of custom and tradition. It was associated with the challenges to the authority of the Church, particularly the Papacy. And it was a challenge to the comfortable ignorance of many of the Clergy about the Scriptures. In the turbulence of the 1520s and 1530s, translation was heresy.

Tyndale was once taunted by a fellow cleric who said "*We are better to be without God's laws than the Pope's*". To which he replied, "*I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plow to know more of the scriptures than you!*" That commitment to Scriptural education and biblical literacy for everyone is part of the early modern turn. Reformers and Counter-Reformers, Protestants and Catholics alike would all become engaged in the projects of Scriptural translation. Translation is an integral feature of the witness to Christ. The only real question is about the quality of translation.

The real turning point is about language itself. Tyndale, in his *Obedience of a Christian Man* written in 1528 and admired by Ann Boleyn observes the following:

*They will say it [the Bible] cannot be translated into our tongue, it is so rude. It is not so rude as they are false liars. For the Greek tongue agreeth more with the English than with the Latin. And the properties of the Hebrew tongue agreeth a thousand times more with the English than with the Latin. The manner of speaking is both one, so that in a thousand places thou needest not but to translate it in to the English word for word when thou must seek a compass in the Latin & yet shall have much work to translate it well-favouredly, so that it have the same grace and sweetness, sense and pure understanding with it in the Latin as it hath in the Hebrew. A thousand parts better may it be translated into the English than into the Latin.*

Learned, like Jerome, in the languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and, unlike Jerome, learned in a host of other languages as well, namely, the languages of early modern Europe, Tyndale had an amazing gift. He had a sense for the strong rhythms and patterns of English speech and a sense for how it complemented and captured the qualities of the Hebrew language and the *koiné* Greek of the New Testament. He recognised that the directness and compact vigour of English complemented the Hebrew and the Greek, allowing one to come close to the sense of the original. Above all he understood the energy and power of the spoken word. It is those aural qualities that have remained in the King James Bible. He made the *scripta verba* but in English garb; written words became living words.

Tyndale is a kind of English Luther. He was strongly influenced by Luther; even some of his prefaces to the biblical books of the New Testament are taken directly from him; for instance, his preface to *the Letter to the Romans*. Tyndale constantly stresses and emphasises the reformed themes of justification by faith, the priority of faith over works, and the covenant theology which dances dialectically between law and grace. But it was translation that resulted in his martyrdom, having fallen afoul of the English ecclesiastical hierarchy for sending his translations of the Scriptures to England from Germany. Ultimately he was executed on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1536, near Brussels.

What lived on after him was his translation of the Pentateuch, the historical books from Joshua through to 2 Chronicles, his translation of the prophet Jonah, and his translations of the Books of the New Testament along with a number of prefaces to these translations. Despite his condemnation, those translations continued on through the ups and downs of the sixteenth century and then, *mirabile dictu*, were largely retained in the mammoth undertaking that became the King James Bible.

There is a kind of wonder about the King James Bible, not least because, believe it or not, it is the work of six committees, and committees that were largely comprised of academics and clerics. For anyone who has experienced synods or academic committees, this alone constitutes a miracle! The further wonder is that the First Westminster Committee responsible for the first twelve books of the Bible, from Genesis

through to First Kings, was headed by Lancelot Andrewes, a poetic preacher and scholar of great eminence.

The interest of the whole project, as the prefatory matter makes clear, was not to create a new version but, in drawing upon all available translations and the results of grave learning, to make a good version better. It meant honouring the poetic and linguistic genius of Tyndale by respecting so much of his work and holding onto it. The music of its cadences and the power of its imitable phrasing, which continue to have the power to evoke their resonance in us in more than a thousand ways, owes much to Tyndale and to the Committees which saw and heard what was good and true and resisted the temptation to make unnecessary changes out of theological spite or vanity.

The changes, for the most part, were simple but masterful, illustrating what Benson Bobrick has called "*the Midas touch*". Examples are legion, but consider the passage in *1 Kings 19.22* where the Lord is made known to Elijah not in the earthquake, nor in the fire but "*after the fire, a still, small voice*". Tyndale's version had "*a small still voice*" and Coverdale's "*a still soft hissing*", but Andrewes and his committee took Tyndale's words and Coverdale's phrasing to achieve the quiet eloquence of "*a still small voice*".

Another example would be in Mark 10. Tyndale has "*They brought children to him that he should touch them ... Suffer the children to come unto me*" to which the King James Bible has added the master touches of "*young*" and "*little*" to creative effect. Thus "*they brought young children to him*" and "*Suffer the little children to come unto me*".

There is the creative and effective use of the repetition of words and key-phrases which not only complements the semantic parallelism of the Hebrew but also adds a measure of heightened anticipation and drama to the narrative sequence. As Adam Nicolson observes, the translation is one in which there is "*a deliberate carrying of multiple meanings beneath the surface of a single text*".

From Genesis to Revelation, from "*And God said, Let there be light, and there was light*" to "*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,*" we owe so many memorable phrases to Tyndale. "*The salt of the earth*", "*the patience of Job*", "*scapegoat*", "*clothed and in his right mind*", "*full of good works*", "*atonement*", "*a law unto themselves*", to mention but a few of a long and great litany of words and phrases that stick in our souls and shape us into the understanding of our life with God in Christ. For that was Tyndale's overarching purpose. "*Read God's Word diligently and with a good heart and it shall teach thee all things,*" he says. It is not too much to say that the King James Bible is his monument, his witness to Christ for whom he suffered. He prayed at his execution, "*O Lord, open the King of England's eyes*". We may say, perhaps, that they were, albeit by a later King. Translation is Tyndale's witness to which the King James Bible bears eloquent testimony.

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