

Its BRILLIANCE

The 400th anniversary of the appearance of the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible (AV) is a good time to consider the enormous impact made by this magnificent translation of the word of God. Three aspects of this monumental work are worthy of consideration.

Its beauty

The beauty of the AV has long been agreed upon by both supporters and detractors. Professor Richard Dawkins, the well-known atheist activist, contributed a reading from the AV to the 1611 Trust set up by the British Labour MP, Frank Field. Dawkins had this to say of the AV: “You can’t appreciate English literature unless you are steeped to some extent in the King James Bible. People don’t know that proverbial phrases, which make echoes in their minds, come from this Bible. We are a Christian culture, we come from a Christian culture, and not to know the King James Bible, is to be in some small way, barbarian.”

Sir Winston Churchill, the great British wartime leader, observed that the scholars who produced the AV had forged an enduring link, literal and religious, between the English-speaking people of

the world. Andrew Motion, British Poet Laureate (1999–2009) affirmed: “To read it is to feel simultaneously at home, a citizen of the world, and a traveller through eternity.”

Dr. Cleland Boyd McAfee produced a detailed study of the AV in his book *The Greatest English Classic*. McAfee says, “In all study of English literature, if there be any one axiom which may be accepted without question, it is that the ultimate standard of English prose style is set by the King James Version of the Bible.... One can say that if any writing departs very far from the characteristics of the English Bible it is not good English writing.” He goes on to show that there is a musical element in the literature of the Bible caused by the balancing of phrases or ideas. Citing the 35th chapter of Isaiah, he shows that it is “remarkably musical in the English” and could “be set to music as it stands.” We might add that Handel’s magnificent *Messiah* draws its inspiration and most of its words from the AV.

Its accuracy

The accuracy of the AV depends on two things: the text on which it is based and the ability and care of the translators. Rev. Malcolm Watts details the arguments in favour of the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Old Testament. He says of the Massoretes: “So meticulous were they in their studies that they even counted the verses, words, and letters of the Old Testament.... Copyists had to follow the Talmud’s strict rules, which included the following: Only the skins of clean animals were to be used; each skin must contain this same number of columns; there were to be no less than

forty-eight and no more than sixty lines; ... no word or letter was to be written from memory; if so much as a letter was omitted, or wrongly inserted, or even if one letter touched another, the sheet had to be destroyed; three mistakes on a page meant the whole manuscript was condemned.... A manuscript surviving this process could hardly be anything but amazingly accurate.”

From the fourth century onwards, one text type is reflected in the vast majority of New Testament manuscripts. That text came to be known as the “Received Text.” It commands the support of 80–90 percent of the manuscripts

words have been inserted to help the understanding of the passage.

Its longevity

We scarcely need to stress the longevity of the AV, it being about to celebrate its 400th anniversary! It reigned virtually unchallenged for nearly 300 years, except for a few decades early on when many Protestants preferred the Geneva Bible. No other Bible in the English language has sold as many copies. Other versions have come and gone, yet even today the AV has the second highest sales of Bibles, in both financial and numerical terms.

of the lower level is offensive and disgusting to those on the upper level.

These are, however, only the two extremes, where move words common to both, where are avoided the words peculiar to each. There is the language that most people speak. It is the language of the street, and also of the study, of the parlour, and of the shop.

Now, originally the Bible moved on that middle level. It was a colloquial book.... The

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available to us and has been preserved for the church down through the centuries in accordance with the promise of the Saviour who said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

George M. Bowman, in an article entitled “Authorised Version Means Doctrinal Accuracy” declares: “The 47 translators of the Authorised Version were so devoted to the accuracy of God’s truth that they left no stone unturned in their search for that accuracy. They took advantage of the more than 100 years of study that had gone on before the appearance of the Authorised Version. Many Christians using modern versions today think that the Authorised Version was translated by inferior scholars, but such is not true. They were scholars of outstanding ability who loved the Lord and believed with all their hearts that the Bible was God’s sacred truth.”

In the pursuit of accuracy the translators sought to translate the *words* of the Hebrew and Greek Text rather than give a translation of the *ideas* in the text. This is known as “verbal equivalence.” The translation of ideas is known as “dynamic equivalence” and leads to a paraphrase of the Bible rather than a translation. In addition, the AV italicises words not in the Hebrew or Greek to show that these

We might ask why the AV has remained so popular and enduring. Dr. McAfee says:

At any period of a living language, there are three levels of speech. There is an upper level used by the clearest thinkers and most careful writers, always correct according to the laws of the language, generally somewhat remote from common life—the habitual speech of the more intellectual. There is also the lower level used by the least intellectual, frequently incorrect according to the laws of the language, rough, containing what we now call “slang” the talk of a knot of men on the street corner waiting for a new bulletin of a ball game, cheap in words, impoverished in synonyms using one word to express any number of ideas, as slang always does.

Those two levels are really farther apart than we are apt to realize. A book or an article on the upper level will be uninteresting and unintelligible to the people on the lower level and a book in the language

King James Version is on the middle level. It is a striking blending of the dignity of the upper level and the popularity of the lower level.

This “middle” language tends to be much more enduring than language that is pitched at the higher or lower levels.

We might add that many of the phrases of the AV are still in use in popular everyday expressions. Professor Dawkins has made a list of about two pages of phrases that come from the AV, most people not being aware when they use them that they are actually quoting the words of the Bible.

The AV, this most magnificent of translations, has lived in the hearts and minds of the people of this and other nations for four centuries. I believe it will continue to live and have power in the hearts and minds of countless others for many years to come. ■

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