

## **The Authorised Version: The Noblest Monument of English Prose and Christian Devotion**

It was Dean Farrar who, in a work first published in 1897, wrote, "It was the Bible which created the prose literature of England, of which its Authorised Version was the noblest monument" (1). Echoing the expression in 1922, Dr William Lyon Phelps, Professor of English Literature at Yale wrote, "...Now, as the English-speaking people have the best Bible in the world, and as it is the most beautiful monument erected with the English alphabet, we ought to make the most of it..." (2). It would appear that the full-blown expression, "the noblest monument of English prose," was coined by John Livingstone Lowes, an American scholar of English Literature, in 1936 (3). Winston Churchill, who may have been aware of any or all of the above, wrote that, "...a splendid and lasting monument was created to the genius of the English-speaking people" (4).

Earlier still, in 1883, Dean JW Burgon used the expression "the noblest literary work in the Anglo-Saxon language". (5) "Whatever may be urged," he wrote, in favour of Biblical revision it is at least undeniable that the undertaking involves a tremendous risk. Our Authorised Version is the one religious link which at present (that is in 1883) binds together ninety millions of English speaking men scattered over the earth's surface. Is it reasonable (he argued) 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 Authorised 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."

There you have it.

Because it is the noblest Burgon goes on to argue, "we shall in fact never have another Authorised Version (by which he means a translation to compare with the Authorised Version). And this single consideration may be thought absolutely fatal to the project (of the 1881 Revision) except in a greatly modified form...as a handmaid it is to be desired. As something intended to supersede our present English Bible, we are thoroughly convinced that the project of a rival translation is not to be entertained for a moment."

Not the least sign of the nobility of the Authorised Version is that it should be such a stunning exponent of English prose being a translation. Now on the principle that a disciple cannot be above his master, nor the servant above his lord (Matthew 10.24) we are constrained to own that the Old and New Testaments which it translates are a purer, higher fountain still. Its nobility is a derived nobility. This, of course, does not detract from its inherent worth; rather, it enhances it. The 4<sup>th</sup> Lord of whatever estate you care to name is not demeaned by being a noble scion of noble ancestors, though he will be a servant of his own generation. If he is worthy of his ancestry it is nothing of which to be ashamed. If anything, being only the 4<sup>th</sup> lord might be considered a disadvantage – there is somewhat of newness about his rank.

The Authorised Version, then, may be said to be enhanced in nobility by its origin. Insofar as the English Language itself is enhanced by the sacred scriptures, our language derives its excellency in great part from these antecedents, the Old Testament Hebrew and the New Testament Greek. At all events, there is nothing of newness about the nobility of our Version. In these days when history is debunked by not a few – the expression "to be history" in modern parlance referring not only to the dead, but to the living who are past their prime in whatever discipline – it might be thought to be a disadvantage to be thus rooted in history. But the perception of a modern generation is neither here nor there; it is, like all generations, an interim generation and true worth will surface in a reflective future generation, should there be such; for Christians believe the Lord Jesus Christ will return 'ere long to end world history.

Now the origin of both testaments is by their own admission of the Holy Spirit of God. The nobility of the Authorised Version is not merely enshrined in its antiquity. Of far greater significance is its Author. Its ultimate nobility, indeed its perpetual nobility, is absolutely on account of its Author, the Holy Spirit of Almighty God. Again, this is not to demean human agency. "Holy men of God spake *as they were* moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1.21). Whatever greatness resides in a Moses, a Samuel, a David, an Isaiah, a Luke, a John or a Paul is the gift of God. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1.17). Neither is it to demean the agency of a Wycliffe or a Tyndale or the body of the 1611 translators.

What is true of the Authorised Version in these matters, you may argue, is likewise true of every translation. You would think so. Farrar says as much, "It was the Bible which created the prose literature of England," before proceeding to write, "of which its Authorised Version was the noblest monument". However, you have to take into careful consideration, as of the essence of true nobility, faithfulness to manuscript transmission. It is not my remit here to examine manuscript authority. I content myself by simply observing that they are not mistaken, in my view, who would attribute the nobility of the Authorised Version itself at this level not to its translated words alone but to its faithfulness to the particular underlying manuscript testimony to the original languages which was used. Only on this basis has the skill and linguistic expertise of our 1611 translators flourished. If you could gather the skill and the expertise together again, but decline to use the received text of the Reformation, the ensuing translation would not rise to comparable heights.

You might find it, furthermore, a remarkable sign of the monumental nobility of the Authorised Version that as prose it evocatively translates poetry. Without using, say, iambic pentameters or, at the other extreme, free verse, there is such a use of the rhythm of words as to make the Authorised Version prose translation of poetry lyrical in its own right. From the beginning to the end of Psalm 34, for example, there is a wonderful, flowing movement. (I trust you will humour me when I quote at length in the remainder of the lecture. In a lecture one would normally make brief references. But because of the literary nature of my subject I consider it necessary to quote at length to allow you to absorb what I am seeking to illustrate – namely the nobility of Authorised Version English.)

To resume – let us observe the wonderful flowing movement of Psalm 34:- "I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise *shall* continually *be* in my mouth. My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear *thereof*, and be glad. O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They looked unto him and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard *him*, and saved him out of all his troubles...O taste and see that the LORD *is* good: blessed *is* the man *that* trusteth in him...Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD. What man *is he that* desireth life, *and* loveth *many* days, that he may see good? Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile...*The righteous* cry, and the LORD heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles. The LORD *is* nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit. Many *are* the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all. He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken. Evil shall slay the wicked: and they that hate the righteous shall be desolate. The LORD redeemeth the soul of his servants: and none of them that trust in him shall be desolate."

In passing you will notice indeed the wonderfully effective flowing movement of the verbs "trusteth," "desireth," "loveth," "heareth," "delivereth," "saveth," "keepeth" and "redeemeth". A translation whose very modernity precludes the use of these forms will immediately be extensively diminished; if there is any great difficulty in understanding these forms, then they are worth becoming acquainted with for this joyous movement which they impart to the whole passage – here and in many other places.

Joyous movement is not dependent on these forms, however. I give you a portion of Psalm 145 without them, but which still has rhythmic flow:- "I will extol thee, my God, O king; and I will bless thy

name for ever and ever. Every day will I bless thee; and I will praise thy name for ever and ever. Great *is* the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness *is* unsearchable. One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts...They shall abundantly utter the memory of thy great goodness, and shall sing of thy righteousness. The LORD *is* gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy. The LORD *is* good to all: and his tender mercies *are* over all his works" (Psalm 145. 1-4, 7-9).

Listen with me to excerpts from Job 14. Here is deep thought combined with wonderment. "Man *that is* born of a woman *is* of few days, and full of trouble...For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again...But man dieth...and where *is* he?...If a man die, shall he live *again*? All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands" (Job 14. 1,7, 10, 14-15).

Can you not appreciate the great benefit to the translators of reading their work aloud to one another, round the translation table, thus initially putting it to the test of cadence in public reading? If it gave them the satisfaction of pleasing their ears, should it not delight us also? But pure delight is only the means to an end. The constant repetition by delighted hearers serves the end of committing the instruction deep into their hearts and this the translators designed; for they were fully aware that this was the intention of David and others and, behind them, of the Divine Author Himself.

When it comes to assisting memorisation (and, for example, the acrostic of Psalm 119 and other places cannot be reproduced in English without considerable distortion) I would put it to you that the frequent use of these flowing rhythms more than compensates for the loss of the acrostic in Psalm 119 itself. Take, for example, Psalm 119. 98-100, by no means the only passage where it seems to me the rhythmic translation makes up for the loss of the acrostic as an aid to memorisation:- "Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts." And so it is throughout the poetic literature, thereby immensely stimulating the memory.

I give you two other places, and for brevity's sake they must stand for many others. The first is pure didactic poetry designed for young men to memorise and draw upon in the moment of impending evil:-

Proverbs 1. 10-30:- "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. If they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause: Let us swallow them up alive as the grave; and whole, as those that go down into the pit: We shall find all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil: Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse: My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path: For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood. Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of the bird. And they lay wait for their *own* blood; they lurk privily for their *own* lives. So *are* the ways of every one that is greedy of gain; *which* taketh away the life of the owners thereof. Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets; She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words, *saying*, How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? And the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: For they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD: They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof."

And then this lofty passage ennobling womanhood, but not feminism; encouraging a husband to be to potentiate his fiancée; encouraging a virgin to look to expand her capacities one day in the wonderful realm of homemaking and homebuilding:-

Proverbs 31.10 – 18:- “Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants’ ships; she bringeth her food from afar. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise *is* good: her candle goeth not out by night”. From which I wonder whether the expression “burning the candle at both ends” is not derived almost as a necessary inference.

Then there are the poetic passages of surpassing beauty. Seeing that beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, I do not expect my chosen passages to be the same as yours, but we may together pool our choices and agree there are many such things of beauty – so many as to establish our Version as indeed “The Noblest”. Certainly the original is beautiful, yet we who read but a translation are not being denied the great riches of the Hebrew, as I am sure you will feel. I quote first a selection from Psalm 45 concerning the Lord Jesus Christ:- “Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever. Gird thy sword upon *thy* thigh, O *most* mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty. And in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things...Thy throne, O God, *is* for ever and ever: the sceptre of thy kingdom *is* a right sceptre. Thou lovest righteousness and hatest wickedness: therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. All thy garments *smell* of myrrh, and aloes, *and* cassia, out of the ivory palaces...”

Now consider the evocativeness of Job 28. Again, we are scarcely being denied its beauty by a translation even though Hebrew poetry is unlike our own; yet **this prose** has risen to great heights. “Surely there is a vein for the silver, and a place for gold *where* they fine *it*. Iron is taken out of the earth, and brass *is* molten *out of* the stone. He setteth an end to darkness, and searcheth out all perfection: the stones of darkness, and the shadow of death...*There is* a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture’s eye hath not seen: The lion’s whelps have not trodden it, nor the fierce lion passed by it. He putteth forth his hand upon the rock; he overturneth the mountains by the roots. He cutteth out rivers among the rocks; and his eye seeth every precious thing...But where shall wisdom be found? And where *is* the place of understanding? Man knoweth not the price thereof; neither is it found in the land of the living. The depth saith, It *is* not in me: and the sea saith, *It is* not with me. It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed *for* the price thereof...No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom *is* above rubies. The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it, neither shall it be valued with pure gold. Whence then cometh wisdom? and where *is* the place of understanding? Seeing it is hid from the eyes of all living, and kept close from the fowls of the air. Destruction and death say, We have heard the fame thereof with our ears. God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof. For he looketh to the ends of the earth, *and* seeth under the whole heaven; To make the weight for the winds; and he weigheth the waters by measure. When he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder: Then did he see it, and declare it; he prepared it, yea, and searched it out. And unto man he said, Behold the fear of the Lord, that *is* wisdom; and to depart from evil *is* understanding” (Job 28. 1-3, 7-10, 12-15, 18-28).

And Ecclesiastes 12. 1-7:- “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, And the

doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; Also *when* they shall be afraid of *that which is* high, and fears *shall be* in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

Again, such a passage is designed to be memorised in youth and retained throughout life. The rhythms and cadences grant the English an aide memoire scarcely inferior to the Hebrew original. I submit to you that its surpassing beauty and challenging imagery, by the Holy Spirit’s intent and under the Holy Spirit’s direction, will achieve its design of lifting up the souls of young men and young women to worship, love and serve our heavenly Father from the very time of youth to a loyal lifelong commitment. The warning concerning the curse of death is not shirked but delineated in full; yet in such a gentle way as to remind one of the words of Deuteronomy 32.2, “My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew”.

If our Version be the noblest monument of English prose then we should expect it to be consummate in its rendering of prose. Firstly, there are the great narrative sections – too long to quote, for example of Genesis chapters 1-11 and 24, Joshua, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. Pardon the omissions – the material is so vast. But I will draw your attention to examples of highest prose from prophecy and from teaching, one of which is essentially a narrative:-

Prophecy, then. “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh *is* grass, and all the goodness thereof *is* as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people *is* grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isaiah 40. 1-8). Consummate.

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53. 4-6). Consummate surely.

“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, *and* be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Revelation 21. 1-4).

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, *there* ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not

whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14. 1-6).

So easy to memorise even from mother's knee or Sunday School.

"And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15. 14-19).

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory? The sting of death *is* sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks *be* to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15. 51-57).

No wonder Ruskin could say, "to the Bible itself I owe the first cultivation of my ear in sound" (6).

Embedded in this excellent prose translation are many notable expressions which have been taken to heart by the English language. David Crystal has recently published a book, with the title "Bogat," to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Version. He writes, "How extensive has biblical influence been in shaping the character of modern English? Just how many expressions of biblical origin are part of present-day idiom? And how many of these show the specific influence of the King James translation?" (7) I will not tell you his answer, for the structure of his book is like a thriller, and to know the solution from the beginning is to spoil the effect! I will list a few expressions of my own choosing ("quasi-proverbial," Crystal calls them) from the Authorised Version and leave you to decide whether they originated from the Authorised Version, Tyndale or earlier.

"Some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13.2); "the skin of my teeth" (Job 19.20); rise and shine, from "Arise, shine; for thy light is come..." (Isaiah 60.1); "fat as grease" (Psalm 119.70); "charity shall cover the multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4.8); "stolen waters are sweet" (Proverbs 9.17); "the powers that be" (Romans 13.1); sitting...clothed and in his right mind" (Mark 5.15). "passed away" (Psalm 37.36); "born again" (John 3.3,7). One might include such an allusion as "the Damascus Road experience" from Acts 9.

Certain original expressions derive from the Saviour Himself or the Holy Spirit of Christ directing the scripture writers, as "pearls before swine" (Matthew 7.6); "Physician, heal thyself" (Luke 4.23), though itself quoted as a proverb by the Saviour; "in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Corinthians 15.52). While others are most certainly the translators' happy rendering of a straightforward original, as in "good for nothing" (Matthew 5.13); "upside down" (Acts 17.6); "as much as lieth in you" (Romans 12.18); and "he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea" (James 1.6).

I would encourage you to take a notebook and make your own list on your next complete re-reading of the Bible. Crystal has a splendid index of expressions (8) taking up nine pages.

Without any doubt there is the nobility of our Version's timeless language to be considered. The Biblical language is indeed timeless. This has been the subject of an earlier commemorative lecture so I will do little more than allude to it here. There is, of course, a timelessness about simplicity of writing, whereas that which is complex and studied soon becomes dated with the changing of fashion.

As to its simplicity compare the opening of Genesis and of the Gospel of John with the opening of the letter of the Translators to the Reader by the very men who had translated Genesis and John. In the letter they reverted to their own style, the style of the day. Let me give you the opening of their letter first. "Zeal to promote the common good, whether it be by devising anything ourselves, or revising that which hath been laboured by others, deserveth certainly much respect and esteem, but yet findeth but cold entertainment in the world. It is welcomed with suspicion instead of love, and with emulation instead of thanks: and if there be any hole left for cavil to enter, (and cavil, if it do not find a hole will make one) it is sure to be misconstrued, and in danger to be condemned." (9) It is good Latin(ized) English. Note the balanced sentences and the play between "devising" and "revising" among other things. Our language in the hands of the educated wasn't simple, it was too heavily Latinized for that; it was the Bible languages that were simple.

By contrast we have, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1.1); and, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1.1-4).

When the translators are under discipline to translate the Biblical language, their language is simple. When they write in their own cognisance it is not. The simplicity and grandeur of the original languages has been faithfully and with disciplined restraint delivered into English on our behalf. To a considerable degree, then, timelessness of language derives from simplicity, as timelessness of thought derives from the deep calling unto the deep of mankind's common experience. Each of these finds momentous expression in our Version. Both are combined, for example, in John 14.6:- "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me". In 22 words, 17 are words of a single syllable and the remaining five have but two syllables. The language is simple but plumb the depths of its thought if you can!

It might just be added that biblical language, being thus timeless, moulds the language and lifestyle (that is to say, culture) of the receptor language by its translation and not vice versa. The Bible is not to be translated in such a way as would assimilate it to the language and culture of the receptor language. Put another way, if the receptor language cannot already express the words being introduced to it by the sacred scriptures, then the language must be expanded and developed to incorporate them, to its great enrichment. Tyndale's "scapegoat" is perhaps the most outstanding of these, and the translators of 1611 are indebted to him (as we are also) for his many skills in this matter of language in which he so frequently formulated words to shape a faithfulness to the original.

Dr David Allen has also noted that, "the Bible united monarch and subjects, church and laity...it was written in a form of English that no one had ever spoken" (10). Timelessness is also achieved by tiptoeing through the morass of dialect and slang so that, while it remains vivid, the translation stands aloof from kinship to locality. It has an erect bearing in matters of tone and propriety. It is appropriate to holy things.

I have been addressing you about the nobility of the Authorised Version because of its excellence as a translation both of poetry and prose. But the exact wording of my subject is, "The Authorised Version: The noblest monument of English Prose". Now the superlative "noblest," while a ready description, is imprecise. Few of us could quote from all contemporary and subsequent literature, or even restrict ourselves simply to the collected works of, say, Shakespeare, Milton, Cowper or Tennyson and evaluate them by demonstrating the superior excellence over them at every point of the body of Biblical literature. It is a subjective evaluation whoever affirms it; but one with which you are invited to agree as you see it.

"Noblest" also invites us to consider not only the sacred scriptures' intrinsic excellence but its advantages over the totality of those for whom it has been the creative genius. Three things

especially. Its subject matter is Jesus Christ. The impetus it gave to those other works. The worldwide spread of the language it so enriched.

Firstly, the subject matter, which is Jesus Christ. David Brown, the commentator writes:- “The fourfold gospel is the central portion of divine revelation. Into it, as a reservoir, all the foregoing revelations pour their full tide, and out of it as a fountain, flow all subsequent revelations. In other parts of scripture we hear Christ by the hearing of the ear; but here our eye seeth Him. Elsewhere we see Him through a glass darkly; but here, face to face.” (11) Taking the Gospels as a standpoint, he says, from that height you view the Lord Jesus Christ everywhere.

Secondly, the impetus given to so much other, but, in my view, definitely lesser literature. Perhaps two allusions to the book of Job, though brief, may serve to represent a host of other allusions and quotations,

Cowper’s excellent allusion palpably recalls Job 28 though the word “mines” does not appear in Job:-

Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs  
And works His sovereign will.” (12)

And in a rather different vein Dryden recalls Job 12.2, “No doubt but ye *are* the people, and wisdom shall die with you”:-

Almighty crowd! Thou shortenest all dispute,  
Power is thy essence, wit thy attribute! (13)

The scripture “gives but borrows none”. (14)

Thirdly, the rapidity with which English spread throughout much of the world as the serviceable language par excellence. It became, therefore, the vehicle by which the Authorised Version was carried worldwide. One New York preacher “called his hearers to consider “what Providence has done in regard to the diffusion of the English Language,” continuing, “From no language of the earth could there be collected a more able, extensive and complete exposition and defence of the truth””. (15) And, of course, the exposition and defence of the truth to which he refers is that of the scriptures in the English language.

We may say, then, that the metaphor “monument” speaks of eminence, and, taken with “noblest,” undoubtedly pre-eminence is intended. The expression “noblest,” as a superlative, invites us to name whatever portion we will from the secular literature it has given birth to and, brought to the test of Scripture, expects us to conclude that the inspired writings are better.

However, the most valued facet of the nobility of our Authorised Version is that it sparkles in the hearts of Christian believers. We turn now to the second aspect of our subject, namely that the Authorised Version is the noblest monument of Christian devotion. For Christian believers it is the **furnace** of their devotion. One author writes, “I believe we may credit one great superiority in England over other countries to the circumstance that there the Holy Scripture is found in every house, as is the case nowhere else in the world. It is, so to speak, the good genius of the place, the protecting spirit of the domestic hearth and family” (16). The expression “hearth” rather dates the quotation, and the words of the Authorised Version itself “How are the mighty fallen!” thrice repeated (2 Samuel 1. 19, 25, 27) is a mournful threnody upon our own generation. It is a matter of grief that this cannot be said to apply in such a thoroughgoing way at the present time.

On the words of the Authorised Version generations of families, men, women and children alike, have reposed their souls; as I do my own. “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall



find rest unto your souls. For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11. 28-30). Such an invitation may stand at the head of a multitude of kind invitations, pleadings and declarations which have captivated and melted the souls of millions.

Among others, we may consider, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3.16). "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (Acts 3.6). "Save yourselves from this untoward generation" (Acts 2.40). "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God" (1 John 3.1)."Let us eat and be merry: For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry" (Luke 15. 23-24).

The passages which most specifically exalt the Son are highly significant inducements to devotion. "Lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3.17); "I know that Messiah cometh which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things. Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am *he*" (John 4. 25-26).

Again, you will forgive me for the two following more extensive quotations. Once again they stand as representatives of many. Generations have been elevated in mind and soul – language and truth combining to transform our innermost beings.

"If *there be* therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. *Let* nothing *be done* through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth; And *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2. 1-11).

And in Ephesians 2. 4-7:- "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in *his* kindness toward us through Christ Jesus."

Christian devotion may be revealed in other ways. An adult, though independent of other external constraints, may be in glad subjection to God in His word. The obedience of our lives derives from that personal devotion to the Saviour which is directed by the Scriptures. Generations have discovered that stimulus in the ten commandments. Those commandments were as schoolmasters to show them their shortfall and lead them to Christ; but after redemption, the keeping of those same commandments was the expression of devoted hearts. Briefly, I isolate two examples demonstrating their application:- "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16.13). "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13.2).

Christian devotion is at the heart of family life. It is an old adage that those who pray together stay together. Modern schedules make it hard but, wherever families gather together for worship in the home, the Bible is at the heart. The Bible prompts the gathering; the gathering strengthens family ties

and binds mother, father and children together and each to the Saviour. Thus the Authorised Version has endeared itself to generations of families wherever the English language is spoken. Countless must be the times that a child in the loneliness of the guilt of his sin has found relief in the words, "Confess *your* faults one to another" (James 5.16) and been emboldened to make a clean breast of troubling sins within the gentle confines of shared confidence in such a word at home. It would not be the only passage. Wives and husbands bound close by the words of Ephesians 5 and reading it from time to time in family devotions are motivated by its treasured declarations, among which are the words, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; ... That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5. 25,27).

How often may it have been that in family prayer, petitions have been emboldened (and praying skills increased, if one may so speak) by the declaration of Ephesians 3.14-21 with the mighty conclusion at verses 20-21 "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

If "faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10.17), as it does, what an enormous influence has been directed over young minds throughout childhood years spent sharing family devotions. The effect is truly incalculable that our version has had in bringing about the new birth - of which the Lord Jesus Christ speaks in John 3 that the kingdom of God can neither be seen nor entered without it.

What accumulations of daily strength, what energies have doubtless been generated by words such as, "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith" (Hebrews 12.1-2) whenever these, and words in similar vein, have been frequently encountered in the sacred scriptures. What encouragement in the dear Saviour to read, "He shall not fail nor be discouraged..." (Isaiah 42.4). If He shall not be discouraged, then how shall I, being in Him as my Representative, be discouraged? Fortressed, no doubt by the nearby words, "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench" (Isaiah 42.3).

One has written that, "the constant reading of the Bible in public and in private has contributed to a unity of the language alike in time and use, by all sorts and conditions of men" (17). Language is not to be the be all and end all; it is indeed the means to an end. Wherever the full redemptive purpose of the Bible, ministered to us in the language of our Version, has been realised in transformed lives - there we may say that the end for which the sacred scriptures were given has been accomplished and our translators, with all the scholarship which they brought to the task, vindicated.

Now language is a means of communicating so as to understand another. But beyond that lies fellowship, discipleship even, by which I mean that understanding another is with a view to an identification of opinion or purpose. Understanding is but a step towards assimilation. To obtain the marrow and fatness of this great body of literature which constitutes our Authorised Version, for it to do us lasting good, we cannot stand aside and view it objectively. We cannot view it from afar objectively, emotionally even, if we are to reap the benefit of the purpose for which it was given.

It is the subject matter which elevates the prose. The Authorised Version is about excellence and nobility but that nobility is not an end in itself. It is to ennoble us, impart excellence to the inner reaches of our souls. In the words of the Apostle John (John 20.31), "...these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name".

It is easy to view the shortcomings of Ezekiel's hearers without seeing how easily we may be no wiser than they. Of them, and of Ezekiel, we read (Ezekiel 33.32), "And, lo, thou *art* unto them as a very

lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not". With the sacred scriptures content is everything. Language can, of course, be enjoyed for its own sake. But that is to truncate its design. The language of the holy scriptures is simply an assistance to the expression of its glorious contents that we might assimilate them.

Should we not therefore reason that where we have nobility of expression, exalted language, it is because the substance of what is being expressed is far, far more exalted still? Should we not go further and say that the exalted subject matter has irradiated the language with its own glory by the input of the Holy Spirit of the Lord? Am I leading you too far to suggest that the God, whose universe in all its variety, life, power and whatsoever you care to name, reflects but a part of His own glory, has imparted that beauty in all that is contained within this volume in such a way as we can share?

And that our heavenly Father's purpose in committing to writing His Word is to draw you to Himself in love and devotion? Why else would He have authorised David to sing of the Lord in Psalm 138.2, "...thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name"? Why else, other than to declare the impossibility of knowing Him but for this word which He has chosen as fit for the purpose of attracting men and women of all ages and cultures to Himself? How can we just look on and, indeed, look through the window into this Grand House and think that all we are allowed is a viewing? I quote from the author, Dean Farrar, with whom I began, who eloquently exclaims as he quotes another, "He who has lost his God can find Him again in this book, and he who has never known Him is here struck by the breath of the divine word" (18).

A popular expression has it, "use it or lose it" concerning railway lines and post offices threatened with closure. The thought, if not the expression, is pertinent if the Authorised Version is not to become a curiosity merely. It is meant to be used; read daily. And because of its excellence the Trinitarian Bible Society believes that its return to the fore would reinvigorate the people of God.

Jeremiah speaks of "old paths" - "...ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein..." (Jeremiah 6.16). It is a telling picture, in our times perhaps of green lanes and the trackbeds of former railways. For the most part they are overgrown and obscured, and, if used at all, not for their former purpose. In some cases only the veriest senior citizens could conduct you to their whereabouts. The illustration is to bring home to us that when it comes to spiritual matters these old paths are best. What has superseded is not an improvement. Here is a much more important issue than that the elderly may be predisposed to what is venerable. According to the scriptures the old paths **were** best. It was so in Jeremiah's time, is so always, and can be said to go back as far as the disobedience of Cain concerning which Abel's path was better. Of Abel's faith it is written that "by it he being dead, yet speaketh" (Hebrews 11.4).

The Authorised Version would do for this and subsequent generations what it has always done in the past, drawing them off from the world and the things that are in the world by pointing them to the standards of the Lord which are always and everywhere valid. "Tolle, lege" ("take up and read") is what the translators urged their generation. (19)

If the initial attraction were for some to be its literary excellence, it is yet the word of God and has within itself the power to draw its readers by its supreme attraction to its chief end, that is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. "This majestic translation will safely guide him (the reader) into all things needful...as would the original scriptures, if he could read them..." (20).

Because of its excellence among English speaking peoples, I believe it may not be amiss to affirm of the Authorised Version, "*they that shall be* of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in" (Isaiah 58.12). It has, indeed, a wonderful and unfinished history.

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