

Chapter 4: The Enduring Influence of the Authorised Version¹

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It is almost impossible to overstate the widespread and lasting influence of the King James Bible, or the Authorised Version, as it is better known in the land of its origin.² Referring specifically to this much-loved 1611 version of the Bible, TV presenter and academic, Melvyn Bragg, states it has had “more impact on the ideology of the last four centuries than any other creed, manifesto or dogma”.³

Others are quick to agree. Alister McGrath, Professor of Theology at the University of London’s Kings College, says that its influence “has been incalculable”.⁴ Gordon Campbell, a world authority on the English language and Professor of Renaissance Literature at the University of Leicester, claims it is “the most important book in the English language”.⁵ Professor David Daniell argues that any attempt to understand the literature, politics, art and social history of England and the English-speaking world of the past 400 years without knowledge of the Authorised Version “is to be crippled”.⁶ Perhaps the fact that more than 10 million copies of all versions are sold every year in more than 1700 languages is the most compelling evidence of the Bible’s continuing worldwide influence and of the persisting impact of the version which dominated the English-speaking world for more than three centuries.

The Authorised Version profoundly influenced the entire English-speaking world and Western culture for more than three hundred years. As McGrath states, “It changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture”. And it did

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published in Nikolaus Satelmajer, ed., *The Book That Changed the World: The Story of the King James Version*, Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2012. It is here expanded, with ‘Authorised Version’ generally replacing ‘King James Version’.

2 Some of the material in this chapter has been adapted and expanded from the author’s *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* (Warburton: VIC: Signs Publishing Co., 2nd edit., 2011).

3 Melvyn Bragg, *12 Books That Changed The World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), 282.

4 Alister McGrath, *In The Beginning: The Story of The King James Bible*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), 1.

5 Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of The King James Version* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 2.

6 David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1994), 3.

so in many ways.

At a most fundamental level it has had an immense impact on *the English language*. In his fascinating study of the Authorised Version, *In The Beginning, the Story of the King James Bible*, McGrath says that it was one of the two “greatest influences on the shaping of the English language”, stating that its publication was “a landmark in the history of the language”.⁷ Melvyn Bragg, in his equally important account of the Authorised Version, *The Book of Books: the Radical Impact of the King James Bible*, describes it “as a hoarder and breeder of language” and says it is “without parallel in our culture”.⁸

Many of the words and phrases that first appeared in Tyndale’s New Testament and then flowed on into the Authorised Version are still part of the every-day language of millions who speak English: “the salt of the earth”, “the powers that be”, “a law unto themselves”, “highways and byways”, “a word in season”, “lick the dust”, “the root of all evil”, “the heat of the day”, “coals of fire”, “fight the good fight”, “from strength to strength”, “like a lamb to the slaughter”, “the signs of the times”, “how are the mighty fallen”, “the skin of our teeth”, “no rest to the wicked”, “nothing new under the sun” and many more. Spoken and written English were unquestionably shaped by the vocabulary and imagery of the Bible. In his study of the Authorised Version’s influence on our language, English specialist and honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, David Crystal, examines in detail many of these expressions. With specific reference to the words and phrases coined by Tyndale and others who contributed to the Authorised Version Crystal says “no book has had greater influence on the English language”.⁹

Many other outstanding scholars over the last century have also recognized the immense influence of the Authorised Version on the development of English. They include Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch of Cambridge University, Professor Albert Cook of Yale University and more recently, as already noted, Professor Alister McGrath of Oxford and London. McGrath states quite categorically that the Authorised Version exercised a “substantial and decisive influence over the shaping of the English language”.¹⁰ In assessing the significance of all this we should remember that English is the first language of many countries, including Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States of America. It is also the international language of politics, commerce, industry, communication, medicine and

7 McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 1.

8 Melvyn Bragg, *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible 1611-2011* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), 129.

9 David Crystal, *Begat: The King James Bible and The English Language* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 261.

10 McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 258.

aviation. The influence of the AV on the language used in much of the world today has been far greater than King James or his translators could ever have imagined.

From language flows literature and it is hardly surprising that the Authorised Version of the Bible had a profound and lasting impact on **English literature**. We tend to think of the Bible as the source of religious truth, forgetting its inherent value as literature. Yet the Bible is great literature in its own right. The Authorised Version is itself an outstanding example of the best in English literature, according to Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch who, in a lecture at Cambridge University, stated that it was “the very greatest literary achievement in the English language”.¹¹ Another description cited by McGrath calls the Authorised Version the “noblest monument of English prose”.¹² This is one reason that the Authorised Version is still so popular four hundred years after it was first published.

But there is more. The Authorised Version has influenced other writers, beginning with those who wrote at the same period in history. For example, Shakespeare quoted directly or alluded to at least forty-two books of the Bible of his day¹³ – the Authorised Version. One writer says it is impossible to understand many passages in Shakespeare’s works without knowledge of the Bible. The same is true of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and of the works of dozens of other great writers whose works are still regarded as classics. Such authors include Spenser, Addison, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Coleridge, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, and Longfellow. We have already spanned more than two centuries.

Mention must also be made of Ruskin. It has been calculated that an index of biblical references in the writings of Ruskin, one of the acknowledged masters of English literature, would make a book of more than three hundred pages. The same writer concludes, “For over twelve hundred years [back to the time of Alfred the Great] the Bible has been an active force in English literature”, having moulded the thinking of successive generations of authors.¹⁴ Alister McGrath states that up until the end of World War I “the King James Bible was seen not simply as the most important English translation of the Bible but as one of the finest literary works in the English language”. “It did not follow literary trends”, he adds, “it established them”.¹⁵

The Authorised Version has influenced *music*. In his book *The Word of*

11 *Ibid.*, 1.

12 *Ibid.*

13 W. Graham Scroggie in R. T. Kendall, ed., *The Word of the Lord* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1996), 27.

14 *Ibid.*, 28.

15 McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 3.

the Lord, Dr W. Graham Scroggie asks a question: “What if there had never been a Bible?” By way of answer the author points to many of the truly great musical compositions that are the heritage of Western culture and reminds us that they owe their very existence to the Authorised Version of the Bible. He mentions Haydn’s *Creation*, Handel’s *Messiah*, Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, Purcell’s *Jubilate*, Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion*, Sullivan’s *Light of the World* and Stainer’s *Crucifixion* and says, “All this would never have been if the Bible had never been written”.¹⁶ He could have mentioned many more, all of which have inspired millions for centuries as they still do. Were Handel’s much-loved *Messiah* the only great musical masterpiece to have survived it would by itself be enough to substantiate the claim that the Bible has influenced the composition of the world’s great music. Its words are taken only from the text of the Authorised Version.

To this may be added an incalculable number of Christian hymns, all coming as they do from this same great textual tradition. Isaac Watts wrote more than six thousand. Charles Wesley, Philip Doddridge, Fanny Crosby, Toplady, Newton, Cowper, Heber and a host of others wrote thousands more. These hymns all drew their inspiration directly from the words of the Authorised Version and owe their existence to it. They have been sung by many generations and have expressed the hopes, fears, longings and beliefs of untold millions across the English-speaking world.

Many of these great hymns of the Christian faith also resound with non-believers. They have been sung at great sporting occasions and at times of national tragedy as well as in church. For years at English football cup finals the famous old Wembley Stadium in London resounded with the words of “Abide with Me”, “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah” and many other well-known hymns. Their words and sentiments are rooted in the Bible, Dr. Scroggie reminds us.

Melvyn Bragg says that the Authorised Version “made its way everywhere”, specifically, of course, “in the hymns of the Anglican Church and in the hymns of the Methodist church and other Nonconformist churches”. But more than that, memorable lines and melodies “carried words from the Bible across hills and fields the world over”, the ripples still flowing onwards and outwards. “The laments of the early Afro-Americans and their liberationist spirituals use the words and deeds in the Bible [AV] all the time, and these flowed into soul music, into the blues, even into pop music”.¹⁷

What if there had never been a Bible? Well, for one thing, most of the great hymns in the English language and much of the most sublime music in the world would never have been composed.

The Bible has also influenced **art**. By art, we usually mean painting. In

16 Scroggie in R. T. Kendall (ed.), *Word of The Lord*, 25-26.

17 Bragg, *12 Books*, 279.

this chapter we mean specifically the paintings of the great masters, known and appreciated around the world. Art in the broader sense, however, includes sculpture and architecture, etching and engraving, all of which have reflected in their own way the Christian message drawn from the Bible. The great medieval cathedrals of Europe have been called “symphonies in stone”. Standing before Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, his *David* or his *Risen Christ*, or before the works of many other Renaissance sculptors, we see and feel the powerful influence of the Bible.

It is, however, in the magnificent paintings of so many of the great masters that we most clearly see the influence of the Bible once again. These paintings can be found in many of the world’s great museums, art galleries and cathedrals and have captured huge sums of money through the centuries. The works of Rembrandt, Rubens, Raphael, Michelangelo and Titian, to mention only a few of the better-known artists of the Renaissance, are all heavily indebted to biblical themes. As one writer says:

But for the Bible these works would never have existed, and art galleries in London, Dresden, Florence, Venice, Paris, Antwerp and Milan would never have housed these great creations of Christian art. It is not too much to say that some of the finest work that has ever been done by pen, and brush, and chisel, and trowel, has been done in the presentation of themes and scenes which only the Bible can supply.¹⁸

One of these “great creations” appeared in the nineteenth century when the English artist Holman Hunt added to the world’s masterpieces his serene and moving painting *The Light of the World*, based specifically on texts in the Authorised Version. It has been described as “a painted text, a sermon on canvas”.

The title page of the first edition of the Authorised Version is itself an impressive work of art, designed by the Dutchman Cornelius Boel who had settled in England and had previously painted members of the Royal family. The work is full of symbolism, much of it drawn directly from the biblical text and, as McGrath rightly notes, was intended “to stress the centrality of Jesus Christ to the message of the Bible”.¹⁹

Much might be said concerning the considerable influence of the Authorised Version on **education**. It has elsewhere been noted that since the days of the Wycliffite Bibles people have learned to read for themselves by reading the Bible.²⁰ But the impact of the Authorised Version on education in general has been much wider, and has been well documented in Melvyn Bragg’s *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible*

¹⁸ Scroggie in Kendall, *Word of the Lord*, 23.

¹⁹ McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 210.

²⁰ See Claire Cross, *Church and People: 1450-1660* (London: Fontana, 1976), 32-34.

1611-201. Professor Bragg explains that the Authorised Version was, for the first three centuries of its existence, “the prime educating force in the English-speaking world”,²¹ pointing out that the Bible had many “educative functions” beyond those of religion and moral instruction in that world. The Protestant churches of the English-speaking world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular, “through the Bible . . . opened the doors of education to millions who had been shut out from learning until this book of faith brought them their enlightenment”.²²

The Bible, specifically the Authorised Version, has also influenced **social reform**. It is easy to forget that many of the great social reforms of the past three centuries have come about, not only through political initiative and government policy but initially as a result of principles enshrined in Scripture. It has been pointed out more than once that the British Labour Party owes its social conscience to the Methodist church and to biblical teachings. Keir Hardie, one of the primary founders of the British Labour movement, was a lay preacher in the Evangelical Union Church in Scotland. He testified, “The impetus that drove me first into the Labour movement and the inspiration which has carried me on in it, has been derived more from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth than from all the other sources combined”.²³

It cannot for a moment be doubted that many reformers of recent centuries, perhaps most, were practising Christians who believed in the humanitarian teachings of the Bible and who, as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries unfolded, found these principles directly in the pages of the Authorised Version. We may note the following:

John Howard (1726-90) – prison reform

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) – abolition of slavery

Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) – prison reform

The Earl of Shaftsbury (1801-1885) – reform of working conditions

George Mueller (1805-1898) – establishment of orphanages

Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) – nursing reform

Sir Wilfrid Lawson (1829-1906) – liquor and drinking reform

Thomas Barnado (1845-1905) – homes for destitute children

In 2009, David Simpson, the member for a Northern Ireland constituency in the British Parliament, pressed the government to approve formal commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the Authorised Version. His speech included recognition of the influence of that version on social welfare achievements of past years: “Hospitals were built and charities created as a result of its influence. The hungry were fed, the sick nursed, the poor

²¹ Bragg, *The Book of Books*, 279.

²² *Ibid.*, 260, 270.

²³ Bragg, *The Book of Books*, 233. See also www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/PRHardie

given shelter [and] lives that lay in ruins were made whole and souls that were in bondage were set at liberty".²⁴ It is hard indeed to argue otherwise.

If we had to choose just one or two outstanding social reformers who were driven by Christian, biblical principles we might well settle for William and Catherine Booth, founders of the Salvation Army, whose followers still carry their convictions around the world with great effect. These were all men and women whose lives were "deeply rooted" in the Authorised Version and it is impossible to separate their actions from their beliefs.

Democracy itself, as we know and cherish it today in the Western world, owes an immense debt to the Authorised Version. According to Melvyn Bragg, its followers "provided the vocabulary, the seedbed and construction model for the early development of democracy". And again, "Democracy eventually clawed its way up and over that high wall [illiteracy and ignorance which characterized the populace during the medieval and early modern periods] as a result of the determination of thousands of individual men and women, who in many instances drew inspiration from the New Testament".²⁵

This would almost certainly have been true of John Pym, the early English parliamentarian who, in the seventeenth century, was the driving force behind many of the initiatives to curb the old ideas and practice of royal absolutism in favour of parliamentary democracy. Pym's strong Puritan views matured just as the Authorised Version was by usage claiming its place as the 'national Bible'. Certainly the freedoms which characterise modern democracy – freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom of religious belief, to mention only a few – were being forged in the struggle between royal authority and the democratic process in mid-seventeenth-century England. And it is worth noting again that the initiative for a new translation of the Bible which arose at the famous Hampton Court conference in 1604 and which led directly to the King James or Authorised Version, was proposed by one of the leading Puritans of the age, Dr John Reynolds, president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

George Washington, first president of the United States of America, is credited with saying "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible".²⁶ He would have had in mind the Authorised Version, the only version available at the time. The self-evident truth of that assertion can be seen today in virtually every country where the values of the Bible, once cherished, have been ignored or rejected and where democracy is all too often prostituted by corruption, greed, minority agendas, self-interest and the lust for power.

24 Cited in Bragg, *The Book of Books*, 11.

25 Bragg, *The Book of Books*, 6, 87. See also ch. 25, *passim*.

26 *Ibid.*, 7.

Those who have written recently about the Authorised Version in North America where the AV/KJV is still widely favoured, have noted its influence in several other areas of life, including social mores, women's rights, and even in early modern science. Its impact on religious life and belief in every continent and upon untold millions of individual lives requires no comment for it is indisputable. Writing of the science-religion nexus, Professor Bragg contends that in the formative years of scientific enquiry and experiment, the latter part of the seventeenth century, religion and science were "mutually re-affirming" and concludes his chapter on the formation of the Royal Society in London and the relationship of early modern science and the Bible with this interesting comment: "In the formative years of the seventeenth century it could be said that the King James Bible joined religion and science together in a marriage which has just about held despite massive bombardment".²⁷ The comment deserves further exploration, as do many of the other aspects of life mentioned above. Unfortunately limitations of space prevent us from pursuing them here.

What can be said, however, is that everything we have examined in this chapter, together with those aspects of contemporary thought and life mentioned above, can be summed up in one word – 'culture', or perhaps 'civilization', in our case Western civilization. So it will perhaps be appropriate to conclude this chapter with some reflections on the influence of the Authorised Version **on Western civilization** in general.

Literature, language, music, art, social conscience, education and democracy all help to define culture. But Western culture is more than these vibrant expressions of the human soul. Culture is also defined by values and beliefs and by the social and political mechanisms that make a society cohesive and functional. In the Western world, the Bible has played a key role in developing these values and structural processes.

Alistair McGrath, whose incisive mind and voluminous writings are increasingly seen as a beacon of light in our time, points out that during the 16th and 17th centuries, a defining era in the development of Western culture, the Bible was seen "as the foundation of every aspect" of that culture.²⁸ This was especially true in England where the foundations were already being laid for an empire, then a Commonwealth, which – with all their shortcomings – would in many respects inherit and perpetuate the values and beliefs of that nascent culture. Of course, the United States of America, only then emerging as a national identity and very much indebted at the time to English values and beliefs, has since played a major role in the development of the West. So McGrath can say:

Without the King James Bible, there would have been no *Paradise*

27 *Ibid.*, 109, 118.

28 McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 3

Lost, no *Pilgrim's Progress*, no Handel's *Messiah*, no Negro Spirituals, and no Gettysburg address. These, and innumerable other works, were inspired by the language of the Bible. Without *this* Bible [the King James Version] the culture of the English-speaking world would have been immeasurably impoverished.²⁹

Only the most bigoted mind would deny that the beliefs and values inherent in the Bible have, until relatively recently, characterized and defined Western culture. They have been transmitted to much of the world via the English language, itself to a marked degree a result of the powerful influence of the King James Bible. These ideals were established in England and other parts of Western Europe and later in the United States of America as the Bible became available to the people and as its principles took root in individual lives and in the collective consciousness of the nations. Indisputably, without the Authorised Version "the culture of the English-speaking world would have been immeasurably impoverished".

Amidst all this quite justifiable affirmation, a more sombre note may not be out of place, for the times have changed. It is hard to believe that our culture, Western civilization, undoubtedly the most advanced civilization of all that have arisen through history, might one day disappear. Yet that is what many are now telling us is already happening. Since Oswald Spengler's acclaimed book *The Decline of the West* in 1926 a mounting chorus of voices has been telling us that our civilization is coming to an end. A more recent title tells it as *The Wreck of Western Culture*,³⁰ a compelling account of the rise, influence and ultimate failure of humanism by John Carroll, professor of sociology at La Trobe University, Melbourne. These writings and many others of a similar nature will be explored more fully in a later chapter of this collection of writings.³¹

Yet this is not merely a warning, or a necessary counter-balance to the recent upbeat celebration of the 400 anniversary of the 1611 Authorised Version and all versions that have followed. It is also another affirmation of the incalculable influence of the Bible in the formulation of Western civilization and its various cultural characteristics that can still be seen in many parts of the world. It should encourage us to cherish, defend, promulgate and exemplify the values and ideals of this quite amazing book that lies at the heart of our civilization and of our national and individual identities.

29 *Ibid.*, 2. Final emphasis supplied.

30 John Carroll, *The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2nd edit., 2010).

31 See ch. 16, '*The Decline of the West: Myth or Reason for Hope?*'

