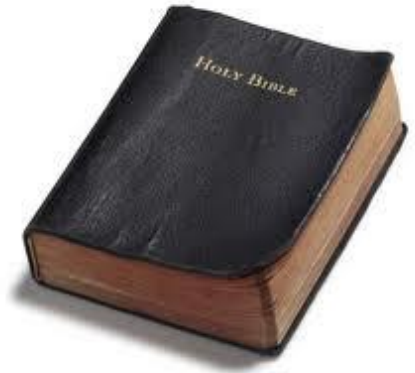


The Authorised Version of the Bible (1611) and The Book of Common Prayer (1662)

Chapter 1 of a new book by The Revd Dr Peter Mullen BA PhD

The Authorised Version of the Bible (1611) and The Book of Common Prayer (1662) are the Church of England's greatest treasures. They were written in an age when the English language was at its subtle, supple and vigorous best. And those who produced these volumes were scholars and linguists, the most learned men of their day – or any day. Lancelot Andrewes, for example, was fluent in thirteen ancient languages. They were all masters of prose with highly developed poetic gifts and one of their principal aims was to produce texts designed to be read aloud in public worship. The result of their conspicuous labours are two books of incomparable literary, theological, historical and social value.



Until comparatively recently the AV and the BCP were at the centre of study and worship among all Anglicans whether High Church, Low or Broad. It is nothing short of a scandal that those in ecclesiastical authority who ought to have acted as custodians of these masterpieces have, these last fifty years, succeeded in their meretricious and iconoclastic efforts to make sure that these treasures of rare devotion have become completely sidelined. These modern ecclesiastics have produced new and vastly inferior translations of the Bible and they have manufactured forms of liturgy of such poor quality that they are often blasphemous or risible, and sometimes both at the same time. What follows is a summary critical comparison of those traditional and classic texts with the material which has displaced them. The reader will perhaps allow for a note of personal disquiet, and even outrage, in this concluding part of my book. *Opus fervens.*

1: The Authorised Version of the Bible and its Replacements

There is a sense in which euphemism is the opposite of poetry: poetry is the attempt to provide vivid images of the world in language that is sincere because it has been thoroughly cleansed. This is the ceaseless task which Eliot referred to when he spoke of *The intolerable struggle with words and meanings* and the need to *purify the dialect of the tribe*. Religion too has its rites of purification. So it might be expected to contain very few weak expressions in its scripture and liturgy – those texts which are the poetic representation of both this world and the world to come. The eternal verities demand language to match, language which itself embodies the certainties to which it directs us; honest, intelligent, confident language of great strength and power. As C.H. Sisson said, *There is no such thing as noble truth in ignoble words*. If we speak of God in any but the most exalted terms, then that must mean we are reserving those high terms for someone or something else; and that is to break the First Commandment: *Thou shalt have none other gods before me*.

To invent a biblical or religious language which is weak and vacillating, circumlocutory, vague and euphemistic is to steer perilously close to idolatry. Some years ago, I received a kind of confirmation of this assessment from a most unexpected quarter. I had been criticising new translations of the Bible and new liturgical forms, when the Rev'd Dr David Stancliffe, the Chairman of the Liturgical Commission himself, complained that I was using *strong language*.

What level of vacuity is reached when the AV's *Son of Belial* (i.e. the devil himself) is rendered by the NEB as a *good-for-nothing* (I Samuel 25: 25)? The characterisation of evil has indeed suffered the debilitating

effect of the friendly euphemism when the devil's son is only a good- for-nothing – like a truant from the fourth form who has been stealing apples from the housemaster's orchard.

The Psalms are written in language that must have done much to purify the dialects of the tribes of Israel, and both the *AV* and the *BCP*'s translation by Miles Coverdale preserve that original stark and turbulent picture of the tempestuous Lord rumbling around Sinai, threatening the heathen with hailstones and coals of fire and affronting even kings in his righteousness. But the new versions of the Bible so often remove the theatre of God's mighty activity to an altogether more urbane and humanly manageable plane. *Let the people tremble* says the *AV* in Psalm 99. *The peoples are perturbed* is the *NEB*'s rendering of the same verse. What, the Lord reigns between the cherubim and the whole earth is moved and yet the people are only *perturbed*! But the word *perturbed* hardly belongs in the same language as *tremble*. Who is likely to be perturbed? That housemaster perhaps, as he confides to the Head his worries about the lack of academic progress in the lower sixth.

The image of the minor public school turns up often when one looks into modern Psalters. The rumbustious, violent and unpredictable God of the Old Testament is tamed and turned into a kindly visitor, perhaps one of those aged or even deceased benefactors to whom we are urged to show gratitude on Open Day. *Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me* says the *AV* at the beginning of Psalm 139. But the scriptural translation recommended by so many modern churchmen, *The Jerusalem Bible*, says instead, *Yahweh, you examine me*. (Yes, you Yahweh, you have been my Hebrew tutor for the last two terms: you – and not some other teacher – you examine me in the oral!) The thoroughness, the ruthlessness and the painfulness of being searched-out and known is replaced by something which contrives at once to be both weak and arrogant, a challenge to the Almighty: Go on, examine me then – and see if you can find any fault!

The Old Testament God can be capricious but it is also possible to appeal to him to answer *in thy faithfulness*. (Psalm 143:1). But the *NEB* translates this as *be true to thyself* which is unspeakable insubordination or else it is back to the public school and Speech Day again where that aged benefactor emerges from his accustomed limbo to misapply Shakespeare to moralising at small boys: *To thine own self be true*. That same kindly old visitor might also have said what the *NEB* says in place of *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (Proverbs 9:10) – *The first step to find wisdom*. But that is only the way in which patronising primary school teachers speak to their charges. *The first step to find wisdom* – and then, if you are ever so good little children, I'll show you the second step. This is infantilisation, programmed learning, religion by numbers and, like painting by numbers, it will never make anyone into an artist. It is a pity to use such a drab technique in religion since here we are concerned with the art of the soul. *Beginning* – and we think perhaps of *In my end is my beginning* – offers a perspective which is not offered by *the first step*.

The *Jerusalem Bible*, in its obsession with literal-mindedness (as if heaven were all a matter of street plans and satnav), is forever anxious to show off its technical proficiency and by so doing it avoids both euphemism and anti-euphemism – because it eschews the English language altogether. It does not matter that for nearly five hundred years English Christians have begun Psalm 23 with the words *The Lord is my shepherd*; the *JB* would not have us ignorantly suppose that those were King David's words. No, he said, *Yahweh is my shepherd*. And so we must say that too.

To be continued