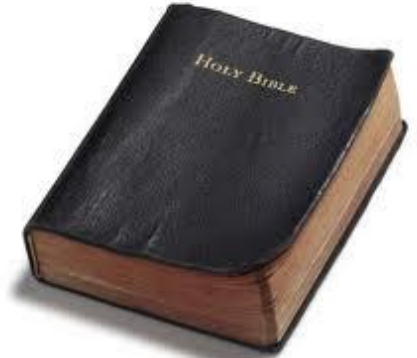


The Authorised Version of the Bible (1611) and The Book of Common Prayer (1662)

From chapter 1 of a new book by The Revd Dr Peter Mullen BA
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(Continued from Magna November)

Sometimes the *JB*'s pedantry, this pseudo-scholarly fascination with all that is merely foreign and obscure, is just silly as in *You, Yahweh examine me*. But occasionally it is mindlessly unpoetic and banal, as in the substitution of *Acclaim Yahweh* for the mesmerisingly beautiful and timelessly familiar *make a joyful noise unto the Lord* (Psalm 100:1). But in one example of supreme idiocy (Psalm 91:1-2) the meaning becomes impenetrable:



He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord... (AV)

Becomes in the *JB*

If you live in the shelter of Elyon and make your home in the shadow of Shaddai, you can say to Yahweh...

This sort of thing outdoes even the *Revised Standard Version*'s facility in the business of parading the translators' acquaintance with the slightest nuances in the ancient languages but their utter ignorance of what will go into ordinary ignorance. The *RSV* renders the *giants* of Genesis as *nephilim* – to the confusion, one supposes, of elderly ladies everywhere. And the *two pence* which the Good Samaritan gave to the innkeeper as *two denarii* – lest we should imagine that the currency of the Roman Empire was the same as that of England, pre-decimalisation. This is a particularly perverse sort of obscurantism and self-contradiction in texts which were always meant to make plain what was cloudy in the original English Bible. In the same way (in case we should think of Sydney Smith's *pates de foie gras* or brass bands in the park), St Paul's *sounding brass and tinkling cymbal* (I Corinthians 13: 1) is given as *noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*. Notice how the literalism, this busy-bodying and tinkering with what has always been understood, utterly spoils the effect because it destroys both image and rhythm.

The *RSV* makes a habit of iconoclasm, as for instance in its destruction of that very familiar phrase from St Mark 2: 12: *Arise, take up thy bed and walk*. The drama, the imagery and therefore all the immediacy of Christ's command is absent from the *RSV*'s version which reads, *Take up your pallet and go home*. Because we must on no account be allowed to imagine (whoever did?) that the poor paralytic slunk off carrying his four-poster, we have forced upon us the literalism *pallet*: and the result sounds like instructions to a sloppy painter.

When Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber can produce a smash-hit musical called *Joseph and his Technicolor Dream-coat*, we have proof that the *coat of many colours* of Genesis chapter 37 (AV) is an item of clothing familiar to all. There is no need for those phantoms of the lapidary style who produced the *RSV* to tell us that the original Hebrew phrase means *a long robe with sleeves*. More colourlessness. And why, when the AV gives us *compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses* (Hebrews 12:1), does the *RSV* remove the Dantesque imagery and offer instead the word *surrounded*, which has none of the comforting, sustaining, mystical power of the original, but recalls only old black and white movies where the wagon-train is besieged by Red Indians? The *NEB* also cannot tell the difference between speech that is poetic and metaphoric and speech that is literal and descriptive. That is why for *wolves in sheep's clothing* (St Matthew 7:15) we are given instead the pantomime howler *men dressed up as sheep*. We

recall perhaps Ulysses' escape from the Cyclops or else that pejorative expression *mutton dressed up as lamb*.

Euphemisms are a sign of a retreat from what is solid, tangible and everyday to something like misplaced reticence and the indirectness which prevents our consciousness from engaging directly with reality. In the real world, and so in the AV, the dead Lazarus *stinketh*, but in the RSV we have the delicate avoidance of anything so corporeal in the substituted phrase, *There will be an odour*. Similarly, in the AV men are *at meat* or they *sup*; but the RSV mentions a Pharisee who *asked Jesus to dine* – where, at The Garrick or White's? And the NEB will not allow its governessy St Paul to address the unbeliever as *Thou fool* (I Corinthians 15: 36); he is permitted only the oblique comment *How foolish* – so that instead of repudiating those who ask *How are the dead raised up and with what body do they come?* He might be commenting behind his hand on the behaviour of those who venture out without their mackintoshes on a rainy day. This is the same diluted and shockable St Paul who speaks softly to the citizens of Corinth – the most sinful city since Sodom – *I actually hear reports of sexual immorality among you*. Gosh! We think. *Actually*. You don't say! Whatever next? But the AV does not beat about the bush: *It is reported commonly that there is fornication* (I Corinthians 5:1).

There is a great deal of this sort of polite drawing-room chat in all the new translations of the Bible, as if sin were not really bad but only bad form. *Be perfect* – St Paul's uncompromising injunction to those same Corinthians – comes out as *mend your ways*. And Christ's white-hot condemnation of the Pharisees, *Ye fools and blind* is cooled into the impersonal abstraction, *What blindness*. Likewise, his rebuke to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, *O fools and slow of heart* (St Luke 24:25) is weakened to become *How dull you are*. How dull indeed.

Sometimes the enervation of scripture seems to occur for no other reason than that the translators are afraid of strong language, as if a powerful presence were the last thing they wanted to associate with Almighty God. And so the AV's *pearl of great price* (St Matthew 13:46) is exhibited in more of that infantilised *Blue Peter* language as *a pearl of very special value*. And then the end of the world itself is described as if it were only an exceptionally hot afternoon at Goodwood:

My dear friends (that is the voice of the NEB's urbane, housetrained St Peter) *do not be bewildered by the fiery ordeal that is coming upon you, as though it were something extraordinary*. (2 Peter 4:12) But the end of the world not extraordinary?

Generally, euphemism is the unmistakable sign that there has been a failure of nerve, as for instance in the JB's translation of *makarioi* (*blessed*) in the Sermon on the Mount as *happy*. Reward in heaven is being played down here, one suspects, in deference to modern man's famous doubts about the reality of the world to come. But Our Lord's Beatitudes speak of a more enduring benediction than anything conveyed by the word *happy*. You can be as happy as Jeremy Bentham by consulting the utilitarian calculus; you could once be happy at Butlin's holiday camp (*Are we happy? – Yes we are!*) – but to be truly blessed has nothing to do with the moth-eaten treasures of this world, and in fact the theme of the Beatitudes is precisely to stress this point. You would think that biblical translators, whose claim is expertise in these matters, would have noticed this. But for these progressive and thoroughly modern scholars, words which indisputably belong in the traditional religious register are to be avoided as resonating primitive mythology and even superstition. They are so secularised and bland, these translators. Everything must be inoffensive, bland, and never disturb the modern secular consciousness. The result is always solecism and the misrepresentation of the meaning of the original text. The bland lead the bland and they both fall into the Kitsch.