

## The Strange New World within the Bible

Romans 10: 8-17

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 6) 2011

All Saints Sunday

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On this All Saints Sunday I want us to remember those who went before us and translated the King James Version Bible 400 years ago. Although they were not perfect and their translation was far from perfect, they are a part of who we are; they are part of the cloud of witnesses who call us and urge onward in our journey in following Jesus.

These 50 or so clergy-scholars, from 1604 when they were commissioned by King James I until its publication in 1611, divided into six companies, pored over the Hebrew and Greek texts, compared them with previous translations, argued with each other over the finest details of chapter and verse, and listened to how it sounded. Most of them were obscure in their time and are forgotten in our time but they gave us what can be claimed as the greatest work in prose ever written in English (see *God's Secretaries*, aka *Power and Glory* by Adam Nicolson, p. xv).

From the 1660's until the late 1880's, the KJV, or as it was officially known, the Authorized Version, was the only Bible in English, and up until the 1980's it was by far the best seller among Bibles in English. It formed a significant part of our English-speaking culture, and bits and pieces of it still remain within the popular culture.

Its idioms and expressions are part of our common language: eat, drink, and be merry (Luke 12:19), the apple of his eye (Deut. 32:10), an eye for an eye (Matt. 5:38), it came to pass (Gen. 38:27), fight the good fight (I Tim. 6:12), fell flat on his face (Num. 22:31), the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4, Eph. 1:10), can the leopard change his spots? (Jer. 13:23), Am I my brother's keeper? (Gen. 4:9), and on and on. Furthermore, we still recognize these phrases and know exactly what they mean when we hear them: "The Lord is my shepherd" is about God's care for us. "'Vanity of vanities" (Eccl.1:2) is about wasting our lives in unimportant things. A self-righteous person is "holier than thou" (Isa. 65:5). Work that we adore is a "labor of love" (I Thess. 1:3). A solid, reliable, and good person is "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). A really close call is "with the skin of my teeth" (Job 19:20). ... I could do this all day. You get the idea.

Especially in the generations before us, even though we knew when such old-fashioned language was used, we also knew that to use such language meant that something important was being said. For example, literary critic, Robert Alter points out that the beginning of Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, is not explicitly biblical, it sounds like it. It echoes the Bible. The opening phrase, "four score and seven years ago," is an echo of the KJV "three score and ten" which means simply "seventy." The Hebrew itself simply says, "seventy." But the KJV translators chose "three score and ten," which because of the importance of the number seventy in the Hebrew shows up 111 times in the KJV. Alter says it gave their version a heightened and deliberately archaic flourish. And Alter suggests that Lincoln chose "four score and seven" over "eighty-seven" because "eighty-seven" is just a number while "four score and seven" gives the passage of time since the founding of the Republic weight and importance. It slows us down to hear it and add up the numbers but more, it sends us back to the deep resonances of the Bible

that was in practically everyone's home in 1863. It was deliberately old-fashioned when Lincoln used it but everyone knew that such language was for matters of high import and grand spiritual scope.

When I was a boy, it was common in church to have someone called on to lead in prayer, usually an elderly man or woman, and while they might have been a farmer or rancher or grocer during the week, when they prayed they used thee and thou and thy language. We young people were often critical of using such out-dated language, which we thought of as a kind of hypocrisy, of a faith disconnected from real life (which it could be and often was). But we also learned to recognize when such language was used authentically with depth and resonance which said to us, "This person is a real Christian and has been talking with God for a long time. Pay attention; this is deep stuff." This was prayer language, the language of worship, and talking with God was serious business, not to be confused with street language or the language of business.

Here is a clue to the different approach to translation that the KJV translators took in contrast to a more modern approach. They knew, even in 1611, that much of the language they used in the translation was archaic, old-fashioned. Much of it was not the common vernacular of an Englishman even in 1611. They deliberately chose more formal and archaic language in many instances, to set apart the Bible from what was spoken in the streets and pubs of the day.

Here's why.

This Bible was intended to be heard rather than simply read. It was specifically commissioned to be read in worship in the churches. How it sounded was as essential as to the accuracy of the language. The last act of the translators before they submitted the final manuscripts to the publisher was that

representatives of the six companies gathered in one room and read, out-loud, the entire manuscript. They made notes and discussed over and over how it sounded. Because they believed, like their contemporary William Shakespeare, that the ear is the governing organ of language, both prose and poetry. The spoken word is the heard word, and therefore euphony is as important as accuracy. They were all working with the deep conviction of the Apostle Paul in Romans when he says, “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?... So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:14-17).

This Bible was for the hearer of the word. It was to be read in worship and listened to. It was not first and foremost the Bible to be taken into one’s private study and read individually, although they did that and believed most devotedly in that. But first it was for the community of believers gathered in one place. The King James Bible is a community book.

One of the remarkable aspects of this story is that the translation was not the result of a lone genius toiling alone in splendid isolation, which is how we moderns and romantics think. For those 1611 translators, the suppression of the ego was the way to participate in God’s power and glory. Which is also why we know very little about the individual translators. It was not about them. Anymore than it is about me. It’s about us and we, who upon hearing the word of God are once again re-membered into the body of Christ – when we fragmented and isolated individuals become one with God and with one another. This was the intention of the work of the King James Version Bible. Indeed, it is still the intention of the work of any Bible.

These theologians, scholars, bishops, and pastors believed that when we entered worship that we were entering into the presence of Almighty God and we needed language that reflected the power and glory of the Almighty God. Like Isaiah, they “saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory’” (Isaiah 6: 1-3).

To enter worship is to enter into another world. It is to enter into God’s very presence. To read and hear the Bible is to enter this same world. And this is true of not only the King James Version but of any and every Bible. We are invited to enter into this strange new world within the Bible.

Woody Allen has a short story called “The Kugelmas Episode” in which a bald, hairy, New York Jew professor of humanities at City College, solves his mid-life crisis with the help of a magician named The Great Persky. By entering Persky’s magic cabinet with a copy of *Madame Bovary*, Sidney Kugelmas is transported into the world of Flaubert’s novel and has a love affair with Emma Bovary, who is desperate for love and hasn’t yet met the dashing Rodolphe. Later, Kugelmas brings Emma Bovary to New York, but finds her exhausting and expensive. The Great Persky returns her to her novel, and tries to send Kugelmas into *Portnoy’s Complaint* but has a heart-attack and dies in the process, having accidentally sent Kugelmas into *Remedial Spanish* instead. The story ends with Kugelmas on the run, pursued by a “large and hairy irregular verb” (from *The King James Bible after 400 Years*, p. 202).

Though the translators of the King James Version Bible (KJV) were much more serious in their work than Woody Allen, yet like Sidney Kugelmas, they knew that their task was to transport the readers and hearers into the book, in this case the Bible.

The 1611 translators believed that the vocation of translation is to transport the hearers and readers into the biblical world rather than the other way around. Modern translators usually assume that the object is to get the Bible into our world, to make it accessible to modern ears and for it to make sense to us on our terms. Not so with the older translators and not so with the ancient biblical writers. They were not interested in getting the Bible, or God, into our lives but sought to get us into the Bible and into God's life. And in so doing, we would be changed.

In 1916, while the rest of Europe and most of the rest of the world was one big wasteland of war and violence, in the small Swiss village of Safinwil, young pastor Karl Barth was reading the Bible, trying to make sense of the world gone mad around him, and trying to help his small congregation survive. He immersed himself in the Bible. And when he emerged he wrote an essay that rocked the biblical scholarship world of his day entitled, "The Strange New World within the Bible."

Barth said that we are not to read the Bible in order to find out how to get God into our lives, and get him to participate in our lives. Instead, we open this book and find that page after page takes us off guard, surprises us, and draws into its reality, pulls us into participation with God on God's terms (see Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*, p. 5-6).

Baptist theologian James McClendon, who made several trips here to Austin Heights before his death about ten years ago, said, "The gospel [biblical] world is

strange, but it is into that strange world that today's reader is invited to enter. It is a world of familiar objects, persons, events – rulers, hungry masses, contentious debaters, conservative religionists interacting in familiar ways. Yet into that world a kingdom is breaking, a Master is appearing, a summons to obedience is sounding. In that new world, God answers prayers, sometimes; goodness suffers, sometimes; faith is born, sometimes. Within the old world a new world appears. By rendering it, the writer invites readers to enter; upon entering, readers find the perplexing secrets of the strange new world their own, its Lord their Lord, its disciple role their task” (McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 339).

Whether it's the King James Version in its archaic but magnificent prose or modern translations like *The Message*, we are still invited to enter this strange new world and participate in it. Perform it. And when we emerge we discover that we see differently, we ask different questions, and we try to live in a different way.

You remember these two movies of recent years: *The Truman Show* about the guy who is born, raised, and lives in a made-up world. He doesn't know it but everywhere he goes, everyone he knows, and everything he says and does is on TV. He does not realize that he is living on a very elaborate stage. Finally, through one thing and another he discovers this, and opens a door to a big, wider, truer world than he ever imagined. Well, the Bible is that door for us.

Second movie – *The Matrix*, where again, everyone is living what they think is normal life of what we see everyday. The truth is that everyone is controlled by the Matrix, a gigantic, monolithic machine. Only when one takes a particular pill are you able to see truthfully and authentically what the world really is. Well, the Bible is that pill that allows us to see truthfully and authentically what the world really is.

The King James translators were among the first in the English language to open up this strange new world of the Bible for us. Other translators have continued their task for us today.

You are invited to enter into it. Read it. Study it. Hear it. Participate in it. Perform it and practice it so that it shapes how we see, how we speak, and who we are.

Amen and amen.