
What should the word of God sound like?

In November 2011, the British Academy hosted an event to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams FBA, considered the role that the King James Bible still plays in providing us with a sense of sacred English.

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT THINGS that you will have noticed in this anniversary year of the King James Bible is that it has not come across simply as the possession of religious believers. There has been a widespread sense that it has belonged to everybody. It has been treated as something that is not the preserve of the Church. It has been discussed and, to a surprisingly large extent, affirmed as part of a wider cultural legacy.

One of the themes that we are bound to think about is the curious way in which religious language – and religious symbolism in general – escape from their owners. They are, you might say, very disobedient pets: they jump over fences, they get into places where you do not expect them to get, and they produce occasionally very surprising progeny as a result.

Is this good or bad news for religious believers? It is easy to assume that the idea of the Bible as cultural legacy means that the Bible is no longer seen as having its distinctive function. It has lost its sense and location as a sacred text. It has become part of our heritage. But I am not sure that it is quite as simple as that, and I hope to show and suggest some of the ways in which it is not so simple.

Registers in language

The odd thing is that our culture has, in some ways, retained a sense of what a sacred text looks or sounds like, even when the Church has been uncertain about it. That is to say that a vague recollection of the King James Bible is heard – more than read, perhaps – as striking a particular register in British discourse. People know roughly what you are doing when you parody the King James Version, even if they have never opened it and neither has the parodist. If you wanted illustrations of this, of course, you could turn to the pseudo-Biblical episodes that occasionally decorate the pages of *Private Eye*. People know what ‘sacred’ English sounds like.

Whether or not that is positive news for religious believers is not such a simple question to answer as we might sometimes suppose. It does at least mean that people are aware of registers in our language, registers that are appropriate to this or that context. At a time when, in many ways, our capacity to distinguish or to be subtle about registers in language seems to be diminishing, it is at least quite interesting that we seem to be capable of picking out one register that may be appropriate or significant as signalling something completely different.

What you then do with that register is another question. There is nothing very new about these issues. Back in 1991, A.N. Wilson, in his novel *Daughters of Albion*, has his central figure reflecting on his upbringing in a parsonage:

It did not worry me that I could not, in the conventional sense, believe. Indeed, I did not see how an intelligent person

could adhere to the orthodoxies. But it had begun to sadden me that I could put all this religious inheritance to no good or imaginative use. It lay around like lumber in my mind but it did not quicken the heart.

That image of a legacy lying around ‘like lumber in the mind’ is one to ponder, I think, as we reflect on this subject matter.

The register that I am talking about – the register of sacred English – still has some place and some recognisability – even if not authority – even if it is more ‘like lumber in the mind’ than anything we know how to use. Yet the very fact of its presence, as an unfamiliar and potentially serious domain of discourse, leaves a good many doors open.

That is my starting point: simply observing that, in the collective imagination, for quite a lot of people in this country – and I say ‘quite a lot’ with deliberate vagueness – the sense of what sacred English sounds like has not wholly disappeared, even if its main vehicle is parody. Behind that lies, as I suggested, the more fundamental



questions about ownership, and about both the risks and the necessity for the Church sometimes to examine its territorial boundaries in ideology, not just in material things.

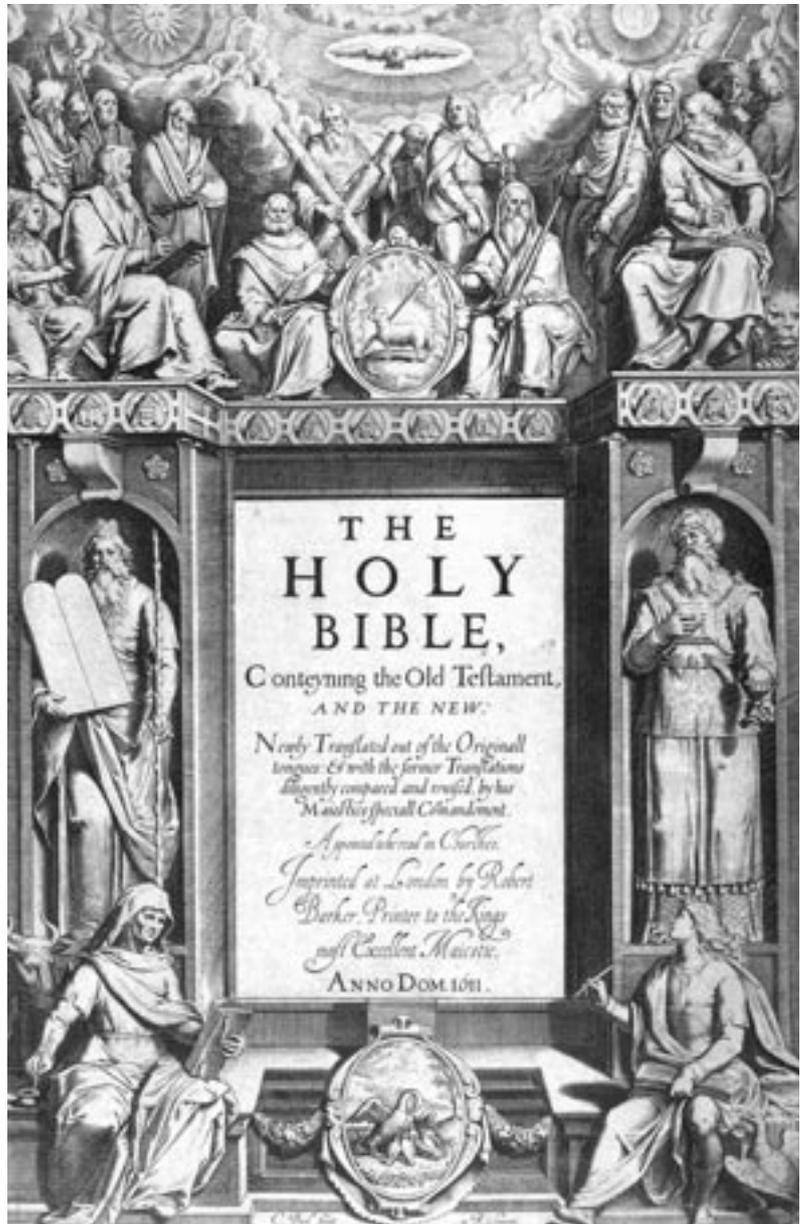
Translating the Bible

I cannot move on in this argument, I think, without saying a word or two about what happens in modern translations of scripture. Modern translations in the Church context inevitably begin with the attempt to remove obstacles. The presenting feeling is that the text that we culturally started with 100 years ago or more is inaccessible. It is an obstacle to understanding what is going on. Therefore, a good translation removes the obstacles. That, of course, is exactly what the translators of the King James Version thought they were doing.

If you turn to the wonderful Preface by Miles Smith to the King James Version, you will see there a set of very potent metaphors about what translation is. It is rolling away the stone from the well so that the bucket can go down into the darkness and bring something up. It is tearing the veil of the temple so that the sacred mysteries can be exposed to public view. As I have argued in another context, it is important to see those metaphors as, in the theological context, deeply Christological. Translating the Bible is a Christological exercise. It is an exercise in expressing what you mean by devotion and loyalty to Jesus Christ.

The King James Version, in other words – and this is a familiar enough point – did not set out to create an unfamiliar register of discourse. It is easy to move from that rather rapidly to the conclusion that the point of translation is therefore not simply to make accessible, but to make easy. That is where I think there is a break in the argument. While the King James translators wanted to roll the stone away from the mouth of the well and make something accessible, interestingly (if Miles Smith's Preface is to be believed) they were not doing that in order to make it easy. You would almost say they were doing it in order to make it properly difficult. Smith goes on in the Preface to say a little bit about why the marginal notes are there in the King James Version. Of course, one of the disasters that overtook the King James Bible in its history was not only the omission of the preface but the omission of the marginal variants as time went on.

Smith makes great play of those variants. Obviously, the main outlines of scriptural truth are clear enough, but there is a great deal around the edge that is unsettled and unsettling. Why is this? Smith suggests that there may be several reasons. One of them, interestingly, is that, quite simply, some people will despise the Bible if it is too easy;



17th-century equivalents of Fellows of the British Academy needed to know that the Bible could be read seriously by serious people. But Smith goes on to say something much more interesting, which is that, when we are confronted with a puzzle or with what appears to be a brick wall in our understanding – when we are confronted with a number of alternative translations, all of them defensible – what we then have to do is turn to one another and work it out together. The translation is not only a way of making something accessible; it is a way of making it difficult. It is not only a way making it difficult; it is a way of making it corporate.

A good translation, then, does not seek to seal off every conceivable channel of meaning so that you are directed carefully, consistently and unfailingly through one channel. A good translation allows you to see precisely the margins of meaning and to know that you can only resolve the unfinished business of the text with one

another. Again, in another context, I suggested linking that up a little bit with what Richard Hooker, around the same time, called the recognition of our 'common imbecility' in the Church; that is, our need of question, challenge and interpretation from one another's hands.

It is, then, quite important to recognise that the 1611 translators did not simply believe that their exercise in translation was the removal of obstacles. That was important, but they believed also that it was the removal of obstacles in order that you were able to engage with the labour which the text demanded of you – a labour which was very importantly shared in certain respects. I would like to connect that personally with another wonderful remark in the history of English biblical hermeneutics, which is Bishop Westcott's comment in the 19th century that the point of scripture, being the way it is, is that it is an invitation to labour.

The language of excess

Back to the Church and how the Church responds in all this. Should the Church be asking – and, if so, how should it be asking – the question about the dimension, the register of scripture? What does sacred English sound like? What does the word of God sound like? That means acknowledging the awkward fact that modern English largely lacks certain kinds of voice in its repertoire.

In earlier centuries, English was capable of working with different registers without too much self-consciousness. But we have largely lost that unselfconscious capacity to slip between registers, or between voices or keys, in the way we talk publicly, never mind privately. We have largely lost what has been called the 'language of excess' in religious utterance: the language of redundancy. The *Book of Common Prayer* would not be what it was, and is, without redundancy. The characteristic contemporary impatience which says that the *Book of Common Prayer* always says things three times over is not a joke. It is meant to do just that. It is a language of redundancy, which again tells you that the first thing you thought of is not the whole truth – always quite a good point in hermeneutics.

The point has been made, again, from an earlier generation in a classic bit of polemic about religious English by Ian Robertson, sometime of the University of Swansea, in a book published first in 1973. It has a chapter on 'Religious English', which is full of choice invective about the New English Bible, about early revisions of the liturgy, and so forth – a great deal of which is both entertaining and facile. But there are some very significant points raised in the background which relate to this question of register.

And what is there to be done now by anyone who sees the need for a religious English? One thing we can't do is set about manufacturing it – not, at any rate, as a matter of deliberate policy, with definable ends.¹

He quotes from Marjorie Grene writing on Hobbes:

But if we are to find ourselves at home again in a significant universe, we must somehow find dialectically a synthesis of what Cudworth asserted and Hobbes denied ... It is some analogue of the traditional deity we have to seek and find, if the fundamental meaninglessness of the Hobbesian world, our Hobbesian world, is to be overcome.²

Disentangled, I think that means that the English that we are more and more inclined to take for granted in our public and private usage is Hobbesian. Its vocabulary is nasty and brutish. If not always short, it is a vocabulary which significantly shrinks the range of available meanings that there are for humans, which functionalises and trivialises a great deal of what it talks about.

The question of register in our language cannot be sidestepped. Outside the culturally very new and still often rather marginal register of charismatic prayer and praise, where the language of excess and redundancy has made a dramatic comeback – a real return of the repressed – it seems that religious believers and religious speakers are uncomfortably tempted by the Hobbesian shortcut. They are pulled back and properly disturbed by the abiding presence in Church and culture of this uncomfortable, indigestible register of what sacred English might sound like and what the word of God might sound like.

From within the Church, it seems to me very important for us to recognise the danger of functionalising our speech in a way that corresponds to the functionalising of identities and professions in our wider social world. The hard question for the translator of scripture these days, I think, is how to find an idiom that still does justice to this register of the strange and the disturbing – both the culturally strange and the transcendently strange.

Strangeness

What does the word of God sound like in a context where language itself is so often stripped down and narrowed? Can we point to, evoke or even articulate the word of God in that environment where our linguistic options are so shrunken? The answer to that does mean attention to both elements of strangeness that I have mentioned: the cultural and the transcendental. The culturally strange, because, of course, the Bible is not a book or a collection of books that was written yesterday, and its 'not-being-written-yesterday'-ness is an abidingly significant thing about it. It is from another era – several other eras. It is something that speaks to us from a place of human difference. For those who believe that it also speaks from a place of more than human difference, there is that second strangeness – the transcendental strangeness – to be dealt with and somehow thought through. Translations of the Bible that ignore both of those kinds of strangeness are not going to do their work. That is why translating the Bible is difficult.

There are interesting examples in recent years of those who really have addressed the awkwardness and the resilience of the texts, and come up with something that

¹ Ian Robertson, *The Survival of English* (1973), pp. 63-4.

² Marjorie Grene, 'Hobbes and the Modern Mind', *The Anatomy of Knowledge* (1970), p. 4.



Speakers at the session on 'The King James Bible at 400: Celebration or Valediction?': Professor David Martin FBA, the novelist Salley Vickers, Bettany Hughes (chair), Dr Rowan Williams FBA. Photos: Warren Johnson.

very creditably sounds neither like the King James Bible nor like the New English Bible. I think, for example, of the work of someone like Mary Phil Korsak and her translation of Genesis, and also her (I think still unpublished) translation of St Mark, which, by insisting on the variation of tenses in the original, by playing around with presents and pasts, and by insisting on the imperative quality of the text – when it says 'behold', it really does mean 'look!' – has restored some of that strangeness, both cultural and transcendental, to the text. Her translations remind us that the translated text ought to be something capable of dramatic verbal performance, rather than just that private reading which, since the 17th century, we have more and more tended to assume is the paradigm for how we come to the Bible.

Behind that, of course, is the perennial problem which many particularly religious believers would want to underline. It is so easy to confuse cultural strangeness with the transcendent. It is so easy to think that, because a text is quaint, it is holy – sacredness is a form of linguistic weirdness. It is so easy to think that the pseudo-Biblical English of *Private Eye* parodies is what religious language is like, because it is quaint. The confusion is one that, I think, applies in a number of religious contexts, where the attempt to affirm the transcendent – the strange, the properly, irreducibly, inexhaustibly strange – is muddled up with the sheer strangeness – the exotic quality – of something that comes from another human setting. So a Tridentine high mass is, because it is exotic, evocative of the transcendent in a way that a mass said in contemporary English is not. There is a muddle in that, and a muddle that we have to be careful to identify honestly.

Conclusion

Back to the paradox and the puzzle with which I started. In our present setting, with limited historical knowledge in our society, it is nonetheless the case that quite a lot of hearers or readers of the King James Version still experience something more than just cultural quaintness when they turn the pages of the King James Bible or hear it read – even if it is simply a recognition that there is something inadequate or something not said in other styles or registers. The elusive area that is more than just

the culturally quaint is where the King James Bible still gives us to think, I believe, whether we are conventional believers or not.

It is because of all that that I believe it is premature to talk of a valediction for the King James Bible. These remarks have been rather more in the nature of a celebration of a continuing problematic set of absorbingly difficult challenges, which take us into some very important places in our thinking about language and society, and about culture and belief. This anniversary year has suggested very strongly that the resonances are not exhausted, and they focus the question for Church and culture of how our language escapes from certain sorts of captivity so as to evoke something utterly unexpected, something hitherto unimagined, and something still unimaginable in its fullness.

I am inclined to say to myself and some of my colleagues: by all means be realistic about what can and cannot be made accessible through the King James Version. Anyone who is inclined to be over-romantic about the King James Version should be condemned to read the Epistles of Paul in the King James Version for a few weeks on end and see what it feels like. Yet do not imagine that the question 'What does the word of God sound like?' can be answered without some acknowledgment of the problem of how we speak for transcendent strangeness in the middle of a world of often radically impoverished idioms. How does our language invite into itself the possibility of otherness – both the possibility of actual human change and the possibility of sheer, inexhaustible presence? The strange persistence of the King James Version in our collective imagination suggests that that question is as live today as it has ever been.

Dr Rowan Williams became Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1990.

The conference on 'The King James Bible at 400: Celebration or Valediction?' was held at the British Academy on 4 November 2011. Audio recordings of all the presentations can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2011/
