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0521617006 - A History of the Bible as Literature: From Antiquity to 1700, Volume One

David Norton

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

‘This treasure in earthen vessels’

Bible and text

The most striking quality of the Bible as a book is its variety. Any bookshop that sells Bibles is likely to have a dozen or more translations on offer, ranging from the King James Bible or Authorised Version of 1611¹ to, at the time of writing, the Revised English Bible. If the bookshop specialises in theology, there is also likely to be a Latin Bible (St Jerome’s Vulgate), the New Testament in Greek and the Old Testament in Hebrew. The last two are the original-language versions of the Bible, though they often do not represent what was originally written or told. As well as these originals and translations, there will be a variety of printed forms catering for different demands of use or price or size: pocket Bibles and pulpit Bibles, study Bibles and gift Bibles, children’s Bibles, Bibles arranged for reading in a single year, and so on. There will also be editions of individual parts of the Bible. There may even be Bibles that are not in book form, such as Bibles on audio cassettes.

If, as so many people now are, one is a stranger to the Bible, the effect can only be confusing. Seeking a way through the confusion, one may turn to the shelves of books on the Bible, only to be faced with another seemingly infinite variety. Almost swamped, one’s attention may be caught by a few works, say, *The English Bible: A History of Translation* or *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Moving on without having yet parted with money, one may find a second-hand section,

¹ These titles are sometimes run together, but neither is the proper title of *The Holy Bible, containing the Old Testament and the New: newly translated out of the original tongues: and with the former translations diligently compared and revised by his Majesty’s special commandment. Appointed to be read in Churches*. An abbreviated title has been a historical necessity, the Americans preferring ‘The King James Bible’, and the British ‘The Authorised Version’. Since the version was never officially authorised but is the Bible whose creation is associated with James I of England, I prefer ‘The King James Bible’, and commonly abbreviate it to KJB.

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and there be confronted with another set of Bibles, quite possibly including what in Britain is called *The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature*.² Opening it casually, as one has opened some of the other Bibles, one might well be tempted to buy, for here is a Bible that looks as if it has been produced for the ordinary reader, a Bible that is pleasing to the eye and that does not constantly remind one, by its very appearance, that it is a book of a different sort from all others. Having made the purchase, one begins to read the introduction and discovers not only that 'the Bible represents one of the greatest literatures of the world' (p. vii), but that what one will be reading is, for the most part, the KJB, and that this is a thing of 'matchless beauty' (p. xvi).

The book that, perhaps, one had always supposed was for church and church-goers now seems to be for everyone, but especially for everyone who enjoys reading the best literature. Never having read it before, to one's knowledge, one starts to read, and soon discovers not only that some of the stories are familiar but that some of the language is also. In short, one realises that it is a part of the culture of the English-speaking world. This reflects another aspect of the Bible's variety. Even unread, it permeates. Some of its phrases and images are part of the language, some of its stories are part of our mythology, and its religion still shapes our attitudes. All these come to us through a multitude of sources, from bedtime stories and school religious education to popular songs and films, even from the footnotes to literary works. The list of sources might extend, God forbid, for pages. And we realise that even that commonplace phrase, 'God forbid', not only reflects the pervasiveness of biblical thought but is also a phrase from the KJB.

While these observations suggest many things, not least of which is that the Bible as literature is but an aspect of the Bible, the crucial point is that 'the Bible' designates a huge range of books and is not even to be confined to books. In a very real sense there is no such things as *the* Bible. Instead, there are Bibles. Even so, it still makes good sense to talk of 'the Bible': what is referred to is the meaning contained within the variety of verbal forms. That the way this meaning is perceived is less than uniform need not detain us now. The key thing is that the way the Bible exists forces us to distinguish between its form and its content – unless, that is, we hold some kind of belief that eliminates the distinction. The form is verbal, but the content appears to be beyond words.

One common religious belief mirrors this observation. To many people the Bible is a body of God-given truth which remains the same whatever clothing

² Ed. Ernest Sutherland Bates (London: Heinemann, 1937); in America, *The Bible Designed to be Read as Living Literature* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937).

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of language is put on it. This seems to be an essential belief for any religious community which does not have direct access to the original languages. Such communities must have a translation, and translation necessarily carries the content across from one form to another. If form and content were believed to be inseparable, then to change the form would be to change the content, and translation would be worthless or even sacrilegious: mere man translating would be changing the essential word of God. But, apparently contradictory to this, there is another religious attitude, the belief that the Bible's truth depends on the exactness of its language, that there is an absolute interdependency of meaning and expression. This attitude dictates the most rigorous search for the true verbal form of the original and for the right understanding of that form; it demands of translators a similarly rigorous quest to represent the meaning of the original unmodified in the new language, and it fits with the modern literary sense that the nature and quality of a literary work begin from its particular verbal form. These two attitudes, the textual and the a-textual, appear contradictory, but, as will be seen, can be held simultaneously.

The Bible, from a literary as well as a religious point of view, exists both textually and a-textually. Literary critics treat it both as a single verbal form – in English most commonly the KJB – and as a textless entity; in fact, modern discussions of the Bible as literature more commonly avoid than use a particular text. Thus the historian of literary ideas of the Bible must record more than just the history of a particular text or texts, recognising, at the least, that such ideas may be formed a-textually, even if they are afterwards applied to a particular text. What he or she seeks is direct comment, or any indirect evidence, that shows a literary judgement of the Bible, or suggests ways in which the Bible may be discussed as literature, or even, negatively, that separates the Bible and literature, or advocates ways of reading it that are unliterary. Such evidence, if it is positive, may concern the literary forms within the Bible, for of course it is a collection of books of diverse kinds, and the books themselves often contain a variety of forms: it may show a sense of parts of the Bible as, for example, poetry, and lead either to a discussion of their particular qualities as such, or to judgements of their worth compared with other poems. Much of the evidence will concern the languages or style of a particular text, for this is often the one area on which any kind of recognisably literary comment is made. This is especially true the further we retreat from the present day – and it is necessary to make that retreat a long one, both because many modern attitudes are traceable as far back as the Bible's attitudes to itself and because the older attitudes so often parallel modern ones, creating instructive connections.

People have always enjoyed literature, but ideas of what literature is and,

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particularly, of what might be critically admirable and how that might be discussed have changed radically through time. There is an unbreakable connection between the history of ideas of literature and the history of literary ideas of the Bible. To begin the task of thinking back to earlier literary attitudes as well as to illustrate some of the issues touched on here, we may turn back to near the end of the fourth century and the account given by the most influential of the Church Fathers, Saint Augustine, of his first reaction to the Bible.

Augustine's first reading of the Bible

Before his adoption of Christianity Augustine was a successful teacher of one of the high arts of antique education, rhetoric: he was the time's rough equivalent of a professor of literature. He was also a most earnest, not to say outstandingly gifted, seeker after religious truth. Immediately before describing his first reaction to the Bible, he gives some detail of this background. His ambition was to be a good speaker, and he studied eloquence so as to put a fine edge on his tongue. But one of the prescribed texts, Cicero's *Hortensius*, recommended the study and love of wisdom. This, Augustine says, altered his outlook on life, and his heart began to throb with a bewildering passion for the wisdom of eternal truth. Thus he did not use the *Hortensius* as he should have, as a whetstone to sharpen his tongue, for it was not the style but the content which attracted him (*Confessions* III.4; pp. 58–9). The sharpness of the distinction between style and content is crucial. In Augustine's time the equivalent of a literary education was an education in style alone. The student was taught to express things well – not merely grammatically but using, as appropriate, the full range of rhetorical figures. The truth of the things expressed mattered not a jot.

Already in reaction against rhetoric, but still dominated by its standards, Augustine came to the Bible, bringing to it a fine mind trained by the literary standards of the time and an aroused religious curiosity. His mother, he writes, had suckled him on the name of Jesus, and now nothing could entirely captivate him, however learned, eloquent or true, unless that name were in it:

So I made up my mind to examine the Holy Scriptures and see what kind of books they were. I discovered something that was at once beyond the understanding of the proud and hidden from the eyes of children. Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime. It was enfolded in mysteries, and I was not the kind of man to enter into it or bow my head to follow where it led. But these were not the feelings I had when I first read the Scriptures. To me they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero, because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depths. It is surely true that

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as the child grows these books grow with him. But I was too proud to call myself a child. I was inflated with self-esteem, which made me think myself a great man.

(iii. 5; p. 60)

Whether his curiosity was to see what kind of truth was in the Bible or to see how well it was written matters not: his initial, unfavourable reaction was to the style. The version he read was the Old Latin Bible, notoriously unclassical, even ungrammatical in its language. Set against the rhetorical standard of Cicero it was worthless. But Augustine weaves his later sense of the Bible into the passage, and with it the distinction between form and content: 'Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime.' The heights he means are the sublime heights of truth. As he writes later, it is a matter of distinguishing 'between mere eloquence and the real truth' (v. 3; p. 92).

One should not press so short a passage too far. It shows how clearly and simply the division between eloquence and truth could work, and how literary opinions could restrict themselves to the one matter of rhetoric, but it also points to the influence of belief on literary judgements. The statement of an apparently literary effect, that the heights it reached were sublime, with its implication of high literary quality, is based on his religious assent to its truth. Just as the Bible is a religious work before it is a literary one, so, in his maturity, Augustine's religious response to it is primary, but, as a relatively minor matter, a kind of literary judgement follows. The passage also points to a possible coming together of ideas of eloquence and truth, for he implies a rejection of his former standards for writing in favour of new standards to be based on the kind of writing he finds in the Scriptures. Faith can change literary standards.

There is a recurrent movement towards adoration – a word from the vocabulary of religion is necessary – in attitudes to versions of the Bible. There is no surprise in this, perhaps, where the originals, or supposed originals, are concerned, for they were, and still are, commonly believed to be the direct utterances of God, or at least to have been written by men under divine inspiration. But it is striking to see the same thing happening with some translations, for then the adoration is more obviously of a verbal form created by men, and the issue of the relationship between an immutable body of truth behind the text and the text itself can be illustrated. Moreover, translation itself must be a dominant concern of this history, for these issues of language and consequent literary attitudes are ever-present.

The legend of the Septuagint

Continuing the movement backwards in time, the earliest extant translation of the OT, the Septuagint, provides the clearest example of this

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tendency towards adoration, for a legend grew up about its making that guaranteed its verbal inspiration, so rendering the text as sacred as the truth it contained. In non-legendary outline, the Septuagint came to be because, by the third century BC, large numbers of Jews were Hellenised: to understand the Scriptures they needed them in their everyday language, common or 'Koine' Greek. Whether there was ever a single original Greek translation of the OT, or even just of the Pentateuch, is a matter of debate. The probability is that Greek-speaking Jews in different communities made translations for themselves as Greek became their first language, and that as time passed the desire for a standard version asserted itself. Within that standard version the work of a variety of translators with their own characteristics is identifiable, for it ranges from extreme literalism to paraphrase in its treatment of the Hebrew. It also presents a different canon and a divergent text from the Hebrew OT. Nothing here suggests a uniform, divinely inspired text. Moreover, as time went on other Greek versions of the Scriptures were made, which suggests reservations about its perfection.

The earliest source of information about the making of the Septuagint is known as *The Letter of Aristeas*. This Greek work presents itself as an eye-witness account of the work of translation and other events in the third-century BC Egyptian court of Ptolemy Philadelphus, son of the founder of the great library of Alexandria; in fact it is a piece of Jewish apologetic of unknown authorship and uncertain date (estimates range from 200 BC to early AD). It is thus a kind of fiction, but it has a degree of credibility, and its chief importance here lies less in its historical accuracy than in what it tells us of attitudes to Scripture and in the way it contrasts with the later legend. As Aristeas gives the story, it was not the whole of the OT but only the five books of the law, the Pentateuch, that were translated, which fits with modern opinion that the Septuagint Pentateuch is homogeneous in style, and has 'a faithfulness and consistency which are not found in the other books' (*CHB* 1: 146). He quotes (or invents) a memorandum from Demetrius of Phalerium, the chief librarian, to Ptolemy which establishes the basis of the work:

The books of the law of the Jews (with some few others) are absent *from the library*. They are written in the Hebrew characters and language and have been carelessly interpreted, and do not represent the original text as I am informed by those who know; for they have never had a king's care to protect them. It is necessary that these should be made accurate for your library since the law which they contain, in as much as it is of divine origin, is full of wisdom and free from all blemish . . . If it please you, O king, a letter shall be written to the high priest in Jerusalem, asking him to send six elders out of every tribe – men who have lived the noblest life and are most skilled in their law – that we may find out the points in which the majority of them are in

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agreement, and so having obtained an accurate translation may place it in a conspicuous place in a manner worthy of the work itself and your purpose.

(30–2; p. 98)

Probably this refers to inaccurate earlier translations made as the need arose in the separate Jewish communities. What is certain, however, is that ‘accuracy’ is the primary consideration. By this we are to understand the converse of ‘careless interpretation’: it means the truest possible representation of the original so that the meaning is in no way changed. Nothing is said to indicate how accuracy may be attained except that the consensus of a body of élite translators will ensure it: theory of translation here goes no further than the idea that the original is perfect divine truth and that this can be revealed fully in translation. In the larger perspective of biblical translations we may say that accuracy is essential because of the divine origin of the text – man must not alter God’s meaning – but Aristeas is writing of ‘the books of the law of the Jews’, and this too necessitates accuracy if the law is to be obeyed and used in court.

Part of the credibility of Aristeas’ account, to say nothing of the Septuagint’s interest in relation to later translations, lies in the way many of the details may be paralleled in later work. For instance, whatever similarities one may see between James I and Ptolemy Philadelphus, the proclaimed motive of the KJB translation was also accuracy. The request for a new translation began with John Reynolds, at the conference at Hampton Court in January 1604, moving ‘his Majesty, that there might be a new translation of the Bible, because those which were allowed in the reigns of Henry the eighth and Edward the sixth were corrupt and not answerable to the truth of the original’ (Barlow, p. 45). This could be a translation of most of the second sentence quoted from Aristeas. Similarly also, the seventeenth-century solution to the problem of accuracy was to establish a body of translators.

Aristeas’ description of the men chosen and how they worked is significant:

The high priest selected men of the finest character and the highest culture . . . They were men who had not only acquired proficiency in Jewish literature but had studied most carefully that of the Greeks as well. They were specially qualified therefore for serving on embassies and they undertook this duty whenever it was necessary. They possessed a great facility for conferences and the discussion of problems connected with the law. They espoused the middle course – and this is always the best course to pursue. They abjured the rough and uncouth manner, but they were altogether above pride and never assumed an air of superiority over others. (121–2; p. 106)

This sounds somewhat idealised, but the main point is that the translators were diplomatic legal scholars and that the translation was the product of consensus

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as to the meaning of the law. What appears in the English translation as a suggestion of something we would now consider to be a literary element in the work is misleading. 'Jewish literature' translates *grammaton* ('letters'), and 'the rough and uncouth *manner*' refers not to the quality of the translators' language but to their manner of discussion of the meaning. The way Aristeas elaborates on their abilities makes it certain that he has in mind an essentially diplomatic quality in dispute and so is not commenting on their use of Greek.

The translators, Aristeas writes, 'set to work comparing their several results and making them agree, and whatever they agreed upon was suitably copied out' (302; p. 120). In doing this they fulfilled the eighth of the rules given to the KJB translators, that each translator, having made his own version, should meet with the others and that they should 'confer what they have done, and agree for their parts what shall stand'. Thus the Septuagint translators worked, anticipating but outstripping most of their successors, for 'it so chanced that the work of translation was completed in seventy-two days, just as if this had been arranged of set purpose' (307; p. 121). If this is not a legendary embellishment, it certainly encourages the formation of a legend of divine participation in the work.

Another part of Aristeas' account leans towards the legendary, and is worth noting here because it anticipates one of the myths that gathered around the KJB. The new translation was read to the Jewish population of Alexandria and acclaimed as 'excellent and sacred and accurate' (310; p. 121). If this is not legendary, it is the only instance of immediate general acclaim for a new version.

The legend of the Septuagint³ came to fullness in Augustine's time, and he gives its essence in *The City of God*: Ptolemy Philadelphus asked

Eleazar, the high priest at the time, to let him have a copy of the Scriptures, of which he had heard, since report proclaimed that they were certainly inspired by God. He had therefore been seized with a desire to have them in the world-famous library he had founded. The high priest sent him a copy in Hebrew, whereupon he asked for translators, and seventy-two scholars were allotted to him, six out of each of the twelve tribes, leading experts in the two languages, that is, in Greek as well as Hebrew. It is their translation that is now called, by established custom, the Septuagint.

The tradition is that the agreement in the words of their versions was marvellous, amazing, and plainly inspired by God: so much so that although each of them sat in a separate place when engaged on the task – for Ptolemy decided to test their reliability

³ A detailed account of the growth of the legend can be found in André Pelletier, ed. and trans., *Lettre d'Aristée à Philocrate* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1962), pp. 78–98.

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in this way – they did not differ from one another in a single word, not even by a synonym conveying the same meaning; they did not even vary in the order of words. There was such a unity in their translations that it was as if there had been one translator; for in truth there was the one Spirit at work in them all. And this was the purpose of their receiving such a marvellous gift of God; that in this way the authority of those Scriptures should be emphasized, as being not human but divine – as indeed they were – and thus should benefit the Gentiles who were destined to believe in Christ. And now we see this result achieved. (xviii. 42; pp. 819–20)

The legend guarantees both the divine authorship and the accuracy of the Septuagint. The perfection of the text is seen as the outward sign of the one Spirit behind the work. Thus the seemingly contradictory beliefs in the existence of an unchanging body of truth apart from words and in the need for every word to be absolutely precise come together.

The legend developed to this point because this is what the faithful wanted the Scriptures to be: it represents the fundamental desire of all religious communities for their version of the Scriptures to be the directly inspired word of God to man, perfect, unchangeable and free from any human element. This desire is strong enough to overcome the actuality that the text is a translation. The way in which something close to fact can give way to the desire for perfection in ideas of the Bible is starkly demonstrated. Similar desires and processes will be seen at work on later texts of the Bible, rarely going as far as the full-blown legend, but always tending towards a reverence for the particular verbal form of the text. Such reverence can easily turn into a literary reverence.

There is little that is obviously literary in the story of the Septuagint, and its readers have left no judgements on its qualities as Greek, neither praise nor condemnation such as Augustine's of the language of the Old Latin Bible. This should warn us, as we take the final step backwards to the Bible, not to expect much in the way of overtly literary attitudes, especially as the questions to be asked are not, What is the literary nature of the Bible? (this book is a study of answers to that question), but, in a very limited way, What evidence is there of literary intentions in the Bible, and what are its attitudes to itself and to literature?

The Bible*Intentions*

The books of the Bible were gathered into one because they were deemed to be inspired by God and believed to be essential for the religious life of the

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communities that gathered and used them. This is not to deny that some, or perhaps all, of them have a literary nature in a more specialised sense of 'literary' than merely being written works, or to suggest that some of them do not have sufficient literary quality to have made their survival possible, if not probable, had they not been deemed necessary for the canon of the Bible. Such a denial and suggestion are essential when so many people have found literary qualities in them and believed these qualities to be of the highest sort. Nevertheless, we may question whether these books were written with any identifiable literary intention if we bear in mind that the intention to produce literature is neither essential to the creation of literature nor a guarantee that literature will be produced. Intention tells little or nothing of what was achieved, but it speaks of the authors' attitudes and, where explicit, it influences readers' and listeners' responses.

The few explicit statements of authorial intent in the Bible texts themselves, with one notable exception, all point towards religious conduct, belief, and praise. As John writes, 'these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name' (John 20: 31).⁴ This is a wholly religious purpose: the sayings and deeds of Jesus are recorded as the basis of the Christian faith. Further, it is clear within the Bible that the Scriptures were understood to have this purpose. Paul writes to Timothy:

remember . . . how, ever since you were a child, you have known the Holy Scriptures – from these you can learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and teaching them to be holy.

(2 Tim. 3: 14–16)

There is no trace here of aesthetic appreciation: Paul sees the Scriptures, by which he means the OT, as purposeful religious documents.

The notable exception comes in the epilogue to Ecclesiastes, which observes that Qoheleth, the preacher, 'tried to write in an attractive style and to set down truthful thoughts in a straight-forward manner' (Eccles. 12: 10). Whether or not this is a rephrasing of the statement in the previous verse that 'he turned over many maxims in his mind and sought how best to set them out' (NEB), the attribution of an aesthetic motive remains clear. Similarly, whether or not the epilogue is by the author of the rest of the book or is an editorial comment

⁴ In this chapter I have, somewhat arbitrarily, used the Jerusalem Bible except where otherwise indicated.