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INFLUENCE OF AUTHORISED VERSION OF BIBLE ON ENGLISH LITERATURE AND
LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The literary influence of the Authorised Version of the Bible has been wide, all pervasive and perennial. In fact, the Bible provided the English men of letters, scriptural themes and also modulated their literary style. It has provided vocabulary, most beautiful quotations, maxims and phrases too. The whole of the English poetry is much indebted to the Bible for its dignity and richness. The Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and the Restoration poets as Dryden and Pope were much influenced by the Authorised Version.

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“Nothing else in the religious prose of the Renaissance is equal in literary beauty and importance to the 1611 Authorised Version of the Bible”, emphatically writes Emile Legouis in “History of English Literature”.

Also George Sampson praisingly writes in his “The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature”, “The greatest of all the translations is the Bible. It is even greater than the greatest of all English books, and is first of English classics - the source of the greatest influence upon English manner and speech”.

John Bunyan too, calls it as “the greatest of all English books”, while Henry Hallam considers it as “the perfection of our English Language”.

Therefore, let us know in detail about so greatly praised book.

Authorised Version of the Bible

The Bible, known as the word of God, is the collection of the sacred verses. It has been divided into two parts :

- I. The Old Testament
- II. The New Testament

These two parts are further divided into a number of books, of which the former part consists of 39 books while the later consists of 27 books. The Old Testament contains the history of the Jewish civilization and the teaching of some Jewish Prophets and the songs and Psalms composed by King David and others. It also throws light on the history of creation, the genesis of human race etc.

The New Testament contains the four gospels composed by St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Leake and St. Paul. It casts light on the life and career as well as teachings of Jesus Christ, the Saviour.

The first translation of the Bible was done by St. Jerome in the 4th century A. D. This was in Latin and called as "Vulgate". Later on the full length translation of the Bible was done by John Wycliffe, though his model was the Latin, "Vulgate", William Tyndale made a wholesome attempt at this task and translated the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek Language. But unfortunately work was completed by Myles Coverdale. Thus, complete version of the Bible appeared in 1555.

The Authorised Version was all incidental result of the Hampton Court. King James I ordered the making of the Bible. He appointed a committee of forty-seven scholars who worked together for more than four years. As a result of their joint work, the first 'Authorised Version of Bible' appeared in 1611. The version is called as 'Authorised Version', or the 'King's Bible', in belief that it was the King James I who authorised it. However, it must be noted that as Sir Paul Harvey puts it, "The version was not authorised by any official pronouncement".

With their great sincerity, fidelity to truth and adherence to the original text, these scholars accomplished their job. Thus denying the limitations of any age, it look back too often and captures the fragrance of the stylistic flowers long since extinct. As Moody and Lovett says, "In the King's Bible we possess monument of English prose of no particular age, but gathering into itself the strength and sweetness of all ages".

The Influence of the Authorised Version

The literary influence of the Bible has been wide, all pervasive and perennial. As Compton-Rickett points out, "The influence of the Bible is two-fold – there is the rhetorical influence of the Old Testament and the conversational influence of the new. It has both the thematic and the stylistic influence".

In fact, the Bible provided the English men of letters, scriptural themes and also modulated their literary style. It has provided vocabulary, most beautiful quotations, maxims and phrases too. The whole of the English poetry is much indebted to the Bible for its dignity and richness. The Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and the Restoration poets as Dryden and Pope were much influenced by the Authorised Version. Pope's well-known tribute of Newton,

"Nature and nature's law lay hid in Night,
God said, let Newton be and these was Light".

Is an obvious echo of

"And God said, let there be light, and there was light".

the themes of John Milton's "Paradise Lost", and man's first disobedience are taken from the Bible. The theme of the "Samson Agonists", too, is a Biblical one. John Keats has referred to 'Ruth' in Biblical character in his famous poem, 'Ode to a Nightingale'. The literary beauty of the Bible lies in the fact that these were the words of Christ reported,

"He went out and wept bitterly, 'My God, my
God, why hast thr'w forsaken me"

The poetical and dramatic effect of such sonorous passages of perfect beauty of highest poetry greatly influenced the poets of all ages.

The Bible has shaped the style of English prose too. It was the influence of the Bible that made a wandering thinkers like John Bunyan, a great prose writer of English. His "The Pilgrim's Progress", is thoroughly Biblical. The Historians like Earl of Clarendon and Thomas Fuller catch some measures of the stately rhetoric of the Old Testament. Sir Thomas Brown in his quaint, 'Religio Medici', Robert Burton with his discursive, 'Anatomy of Melancholy', and Jeremy Taylor in 'Varying Ways', testify to Bible's influence.

However, of all English prose writers, it is John Ruskin who quotes most continuously and persistently from the Bible. The very title of his great work "Unto This Last" is a Biblical phrase. Similarly, his lecture on 'Work' is replete with references and quotations from the Bible. About the influence of the Bible upon Carlyle and Ruskin, Compton-Rickett writes,

“In our day it is sufficient to recall the stormy vigour of Carlyle and the ironic eloquence of Ruskin to realize the spell of Hebraism over masters of prose”

Among other writers Cromwell, Wesley, Richards, George Fox, Browning, Tennyson, John Bright, Emerson, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln and also Mahatma Gandhi all had the holy Bible behind them which shaped their outlook and fashioned their style. Among the modern writers Oscar Wilde is most influenced by the Authorised Version in his allegorical stories like, ‘The Rose’, ‘The Selfish Giant’ and ‘The Nightingale’ etc.

The English drama has also been influenced by the Bible. In fact, it was in the cradle of the church that English drama born and brought up. Long before the issue of the Authorised Version, we can see the influence of the Bible on the Morality and Miracle Plays of the middle Ages. The university wits and Christopher Marlowe, too, were under the influence of the Bible. Of our Bard William Shakespeare, he borrowed no scriptural theme for any of his works, yet the influence of the Authorised Version on him has to be taken seriously. Even the modern dramatists of 20th century like T. S. Eliot, G. B. Shaw all have their themes from the Bible.

The Bible has also contributed much to the development of the English Language. As George Saintsbury remarks,

“There is no better English anywhere than the English of the Bible”.

The Bible has enriched the English vocabulary with sonorous phrases such as, ‘on the sweat of thy brow’, ‘thou shall eat thy bread’, ‘clear as crystal’, ‘a broken reed’, and many. These phrases have become the part and parcel of our day to day English. Thus, the Bible has contributed immensely in shaping of English language and style. According to Edmond Gosse,

“There is not a single native author who does not owe something or other to the Bible”

Conclusion

“The greatest of all translations is the English Bible. It is even more than that: It is the greatest English book, the first of the English classics, the source of the greatest influences upon English Character and speech..... It is in a singular degree, the voice of a people.” ---- George Sampson. It is needless to say that the influence of the Bible on English literature has been immensely great and most valuable. Ever since the publication of the first translation of the Bible by Wycliffe to the publication of the Authorized Version in 1611, its influence on English literature and language has been constant and steady. These productions exerted great influence in the development of standard prose relinquishing the crude style of the liturgical treatises. The influence of the Bible was immensely felt in other branches of literature especially in poetry.

Thus, ‘The Authorised Version of the Bible’, has been a well of perennial inspiration for the makers of English literature. In the words of Carlyle,

“In the poorest cottage ----- is one book, wherein for several thousands of years the spirit of man had found light and nourishment”

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