The importance of literary style in the King James Bible is suggested by a remark attributed to the novelist John Steinbeck. Steinbeck, who took the titles of four of his novels from the King James Bible, had been to see one of those film epics focusing on Biblical subject matter that were popular in the late 1950s and 1960s. He was discussing the film with friends, and he was reported to have said: “Saw the movie. Loved the book.”

The literary style of the King James Bible is always described in superlatives:

- “It is not only a classic, it is the English classic par excellence...”;
- “The Noblest Monument of English Prose”;
- “The best words, of the best time of English, in the best order, on the best subjects”;
- “A monument of English prose and also an abiding contribution ... not only to the spirituality but to the culture of the entire English-speaking world”;
- “Not even Shakespeare has more profoundly affected our literature”;
- “If everything else in our language should perish, [the King James Bible] would alone suffice to show the whole extent of its beauty and power.”

Even the agnostic H. L. Mencken, who claimed that he quit attending Sunday School “somewhere between Genesis and Exodus,” described the King James Bible as “probably the most beautiful piece of writing in all the literature of the world.”

There are many reasons for the King James Bible’s iconic literary status. I want to briefly address three of them here: 1) the condition of the English language at the time of the translation; 2) the Renaissance literary environment out of
which the King James Bible came; and 3) the views of literature held by King James’s translators.

T.S. Eliot described the English language in the early seventeenth century as “still in formation.” He explained that “when England had already accomplished miracles in poetry, her prose was relatively immature, developed sufficiently for certain purposes, but not for others....”3 It’s easy to see what Eliot was talking about, if you think of trying to report the results of a laboratory experiment in the English of William Shakespeare or John Donne.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the English language was decisively changing. Over fifty years after the King James Bible was published, Thomas Sprat in his History of the Royal Society fumed that he was “warmed with ... just anger,” when he surveyed the “vicious abundance of phrase,” the “trick of metaphors,” and the “volubility of tongue” in the English of his contemporaries.4 Significantly, their English was still quite close to the language of the King James Bible. Sprat was proud that the Royal Society was striving to get rid of this language, and return English to its “primitive purity and shortness, when men delivered so many things almost in an equal number of words.” This language of what Sprat called “mathematical plainness”5 is, of course, the exact opposite of the magnificent style of the King James Bible. In fact, the language Sprat sought is eerily reminiscent of the style of some modern translations of the Bible.

As Eliot’s and Sprat’s comments indicate, King James’s translators worked at a time when the English language was still in flux, and more malleable than it ultimately became. Because this Bible came out before widespread linguistic standardization, the King James Bible became “a major force in the shaping of standard English.”6 The translators intentionally deployed a style that was somewhat archaic even in 1611. This style remained close to an oral base, with matchless prose rhythms, and with a larger lexical range than later English would have. The capaciousness of the King James Bible’s language is reflected in the recurring descriptions of its style in oxymoronic terms: “simple grandeur,” “magnificent plainness,” “ornate simplicity.” As John Donne describes it in Sermon 79, “The Holy Ghost is an eloquent Author, a vehement, and an abundant author, but yet not luxuriant; he is far from a penurious, but as far from a superfluous style too.”7

The literary milieu of this Bible was as richly robust as its language. We tend to think of masterpieces as great solos, individual performances of genius. Historically, however, masterpieces usually appear when there is a lot of artistic activity in the culture. Masterpieces tend to be, in a sense, collective as well as individual creations. The starving hack scribbling away in her unheated garret
is much more likely to produce a classic if many other writers around her are doing the same thing. Shakespeare himself is a good example. I remember in my graduate course on Jacobean drama, the professor oriented us by warning us to remember that “at the time, Shakespeare was just one of the boys.” He emphasized that contemporaries did not view Shakespeare as the extraordinary genius that we now recognize. He was simply another penman among a very talented group of dramatists. Moreover, it was not only secular literature like drama that was thriving in the time of King James’s translators; they wrote during one of the greatest periods of pulpit oratory in England. And many, many more people listened to sermons than attended plays.

Often when people think about style, they tend to view it as somehow separate from ideas. Their comments show that they consider style as a kind of ornament, detachable from thought. That’s not the way language works: style and thought can’t be separated. Because thought and its expression are so integrally related, style inevitably incorporates the world view of its age. Robert Alter describes style as “a way of imagining the world,” “the vehicle of a particular vision of reality.” Once again, the era of the Biblical translators gave them incalculable advantages. The Renaissance viewed as real and palpable many things that we today tend to treat either as abstractions or as metaphors. For example, the metaphysical poets of the Renaissance indissolubly melded the physical with the spiritual, and the diurnal with the eternal. Donne beseeches God to batter his heart; George Herbert sees the deep human desire for rest and peace as a pulley wrenching us back to God. The felt immediacy of spiritual experience that characterized the Renaissance enriched the King James Bible along with the rest of the age’s language and literature.

I am always amazed to read commentators who treat the style of the King James Bible as some sort of by-product, like an unexpected bonus. For example, one critic writes that the translators cared only about accuracy, but in the process, they “unintentionally” managed to achieve “eloquence by accident.” Classics do not appear accidentally. Nor does the level of literary excellence attained in the King James Bible occur as a by-product: the writers have to really want it. And those translators did. They believed that the word of God demanded their very best, and to them, literary excellence was an integral part of that best. The capaciousness of their language was matched by the capaciousness of their view of what literature was.

Today we tend to have fairly limited ideas about what literature includes. To us literature is mainly poems, plays, and novels; we usually associate literature with fiction. But that’s a relatively late development in literary history. The translators of the King James Bible thought differently. In the early seventeenth century, it was not content alone that determined what was literature, but also form. When Sir Walter Raleigh composed his History of the World in rich,
rolling periods, his contemporaries viewed that History as literature. The same was true for Sir Francis Bacon’s scientific and philosophical writings, and Richard Hooker’s magnificent prose in Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity. At the time, and long after, all these works were considered literature.

In the end, thinking about the magnificent linguistic and literary achievement of the King James Bible over four hundred years helps us to measure our own times, and our own viewpoints. It beckons us to broaden our literary understandings, to recognize, and perhaps even to realize in new ways, the kind of capacious vision of religion and literature that allowed King James’s translators to create a Bible that was uniquely an artifact of its own time, and one that would also continue to “live on in the ear” of generations to come.
ENDNOTES

1 Leland Ryken, The Legacy of the King James Bible: Celebrating 400 Years of the Most Influential English Translation (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011): 165. Steinbeck’s four Biblical titles were The Pearl, To a God Unknown, The Grapes of Wrath, and East of Eden (217).


5 Sprat, p. 3.

6 McGrath, 258. David Crystal writes that even Charlton Heston, who had read the King James Bible in preparing to play Moses in The Ten Commandments, considered it “an enormous force in shaping the development of the English language” (Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010]: 1).


9 McGrath, 254; see also Ryken, 123–24.

10 Frederick William Faber, quoted in Campbell, 173.

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