



15 May 2011  
The Third Sunday after Easter  
Choral Evensong  
2 Kings 4 vv. 16–37  
Galatians 6 vv. 14–18



## **The King James Bible and private prayer**

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To this day, the King James Bible is one of a very few translations 'appointed to be read in churches': that is to say, authorised for reading aloud to a congregation during the public worship of the Church of England. It is a commonplace that from its inception it was understood as a public text, its cadences spoken ones, its dearth of marginal notes a sign of its orality as well as a reproof to the politicised marginal notes of its evangelical rival, the Geneva Bible of the mid-sixteenth century.

But that is only one truth about it. First, anyone who has ever read aloud from some of the knottier Old Testament narrative passages (the interminable story of Jacob's war-of-the-goats with Laban in Genesis 30 comes to mind) will know the following: that in its phrase length it is as pitiless on the wind as a Bach obbligato line; that you must be wary and quick witted about negotiating consonantal clusters; and that you can expect a showcasing of repetition and parallelism almost perversely faithful to Hebraic storytelling habits. These features seem at least as suited to an intimate gathering as to a public one (think of telling 'the three little pigs' to a child at bedtime and you get something rather like the Jacob/Laban story). Its fluctuating and winding phrase-lengths also map very suitably onto the rhythms of voiced private reading - which was the nearest the seventeenth century reader got to the silent ingestion of text so common to us moderns. So while it is a voice-oriented text, its orality is not only, perhaps not even primarily suited to declamation in large buildings.

Also, from its first publication the King James Bible entered closets, sitting rooms and bedrooms as readily as churches. This is partly because of its printing history: the first years after its publication saw the Laudian suppression of the Geneva Bible and the KJB swiftly filled the gap. Come the civil war and Protectorate, the Geneva was not revived (the last English printing is in 1616); and so we find notable dissenters, Milton and Bunyan, using the King James habitually. In the following century the influential nonconformist Philip Doddridge refers to it as the 'received translation' and makes extensive use of it in his biblical harmony *The Family Expositor*.

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So the King James is a translation which speaks to its reader: a translation with a real-time voice. In this it is not unusual. Early modern translations in general have a speaking quality, notably perhaps in the distinctive voices of Miles Coverdale and William Tyndale, both of whom reappear in the King James revision of earlier vernacular Biblical texts. But along with the rooted qualities of real-time speaking we have a deliberate archaism (again in part indebted to Coverdale, Tyndale *et al.*, writing eighty-odd years earlier). Tender colloquialisms (as in the moving passage of our first reading where the little boy complains of his headache and is taken in by ‘a lad’ to his mother, where he dies sitting on her knees at noon) jostle with formalised address; Latinate words with the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic.

As well as all this we have a bible whose translators had a strongly typological mindset and an eye for metaphor. No matter how ‘literal’ the reformers claimed plain English translating to be, the fact was that heaven and earth came near when the Word of God spoke to the people; and when heaven and earth came near, invisible truths mapped onto visible ones. Behind and above the flattest and most factual of sections, transforming the most earthbound story, was its spiritual meaning. If this was literal, then it was a literal poesis, not the stuff of a manual of godly behaviours. And since biblical reading was allied to lectionary-based reading in public worship, typologies – the mapping of New Testament revelation onto Old Testament narrative and promise – was habitual. Unlike its modern inheritors, the King James version actively sought words which spanned several significations, because its translators thought in layers, not in lines.

I thought I would tell you about one such piece of typological mapping which I happened to come across in the course of my own reading. It is a story of an unexpected and miraculous birth, heralded by an announcement from God’s messenger; it is a story of early death and the disappointment of a glorious hope; and it is a story of resurrection to new life through the power of God. I am of course talking of the story of Elisha’s encounter with the Shunamite woman which we heard as our first reading.

When the Calvinist conformist divine Daniel Featley was preparing his hugely popular handbook of private prayer, the *Ancilla Pietatis* of 1626, he thought of this story. And the same typological parallels occurred to him as have no doubt occurred to you; because he wrote about it as part of his section on Good Friday devotions. This is what he says:

Thou Lord art the true *Elias*, who raisedst and dost raise from the dead this Widdowes children to life, by *stretching thy body* over them. O my gracious Lord, apply thy *Body stretched this day on the Crosse* for me. Lay thy *head* to my *head*, thy *hands* to my *hands*, thy *feete* to my *feete*, and thy *heart* to my *heart*, that I may receive *warmth* from thy *bloud*, and *ease* from thy *stripes*, and *health* from thy *wounds*, and *spirit* from thy *breath*, and *strength* from thy *grace* to *stand up from the dead*, and *walke with thee* from *hence forth in newnesse of life*.

Featley takes the physical directness of Elisha’s action, ‘thy head to my head, thy hands to my hands, thy feet to my feet’ to make a visceral image central to his private devotion. The crucified body of Jesus trickles the blood of life onto the deathly body of the person praying, and breathes spirit and life into breathless lungs. In an image taken both from Isaiah and from (as it happens) today’s epistle from the first letter of Peter, Jesus’s bruises heal the one touching them, so that through grace the one dead in sin is raised to new life in the course of the meditation.

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Featley is not the only person to notice the Christlike parallel of this resurrection story. In an earlier version of it by the Calvinist divine William Perkins, the agency is reversed; rather than the crucified Christ laying himself across the body of the one praying, the person praying flings himself onto Christ's crucified body in a passage of strikingly medieval devotional fervour:

applie Christ crucified to thy self; and as Elizeus when he would revive the child of the Shunamite, went up and lay upon him, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his hands upon his hands, and his eyes upon his eyes, and stretched himself upon him: even so, if thou wouldest be revived to everlasting life, thou must by faith as it were set thyself upon the crosse of Christ, and applie thy hands to his hands, and thy feete to his feete, and thy sinful heart to his bleeding heart, and content not thyself with Thomas to put thy finger into his side, but even dive and plunge thyself wholly both bodie and soule into the wounds and bloode of Christ.

In each case the haunting repetition, limb against limb, becomes an intensifier for this crucifixion devotion, a means of deepening a spiritual apprehension through an action of shocking physical directness. Like a Stanley Spencer resurrection painting, we might experience our spiritual resurrection by sneezing seven times before sitting up, dazed, looking for our boots and neckcloth. It will come as no surprise that the New Testament rider for Perkins's piece is the famous passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians which we heard as the second lesson: 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.'

But here I have a confession to make. Perkins' use of the passage from 2 Kings predates Featley by nearly twenty years – which is OK – and the King James Bible by fourteen – which perhaps isn't. And the passage itself, in a section of the King James overseen by Lancelot Andrewes, is identical word-for-word with the Geneva version. So it is not possible to say whether Featley was working from Perkins who was working from the Geneva, or whether Featley went via the King James version available to him. It seems likely, from the similarity of the typology, and its rarity in other contemporary contexts, that Featley was influenced by Perkins' earlier usage.

But I want to suggest to you that all this doesn't terribly matter. We know that the King James was a patchwork of earlier versions, pulled together into a whole by a strikingly effective committee process. Into it was poured a belief in biblical inerrancy the effects of which are absolutely different from today's post-19<sup>th</sup> century flatfooted literalisms. Those who translated, those who read, and those who prayed with the early modern vernacular bibles watched for poetic and multiple meanings, reasoning that the intervention of God into the world transformed what was there into something more than itself, pointed towards the presence of God's own self shining through the contingencies of the ordinary.

In these vernaculars all creation speaks Christ crucified without reduction or exclusion. Heaven is expressed in earthly detail, God walks upon the wings of the wind, and the trees of the wood rejoice. That is a way of reading, and a way of praying, which we moderns, stuck between blunt fundamentalism on the one hand and the anxious re-editing of the uncomfortable on the other, might find a glorious spiritual enrichment. It is still there for us, a gift to employ to the glory of God who is everywhere present and filling all things, treasury of all good and giver of life. Amen.

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