

Some Notes on the Narrative Style of the Authorized Version of the Gospels

Eiko Suhama

If we look at the English Bible as literature, there are at least two handicaps. First, it is not the work of pure literature to the effect that Shakespeare's work is called the great one; it is not the product of a man of genius in literature, but the book which is said to be written by the religious genius as a record of God's words. And secondly, when we study it as English literature we must think of its being not the original creation of English, but the translation from another language.

In spite of these handicaps, it is miraculous that the Authorized Version stands side by side with Shakespeare as two pyramids in the history of English literature. And it is a remarkable fact, too, that through the centuries in which the Authorized Version grew, its prose acquired a deeply rhythmic quality. Its simpleness of Anglo-Saxon tongue, its clearness of style, its directness of utterance, made it the model in language and style. As Herbert Read says, it "exemplifies all the characteristics of a true narrative style"¹⁾.

The simplicity and concreteness of the Bible, and its use of homely vernacular, might have steadily appealed to the plain people. And easiness to hear, to read and to remember the passages by its rhythmical and harmonious tone might have penetrated into their hearts unconsciously through the years.

J. H. Francis classifies prose in three main types:²⁾ Descriptive, Explanatory (or Expository) and Persuasive. And he says that Narrative belongs to Descriptive prose which "may be defined as the art of making the reader visualise things or people, actual or invented. If pure, it would be the most objective of all

1) Read, *English Prose Style* (London, 1952), p. 103.

2) Francis, *From Caxton to Carlyle* (Cambridge, 1937), p. 7.

forms of writing”³⁾.

Narrative prose is essentially told by the speaker to the audience; it is not written with preparation or minute care to show the effect of what one says. There is some difference between the languages spoken and written. In case of the language written, it is possible to read again if we cannot understand at the first reading. But as to the language spoken, we must catch the meaning at once; the narrator should be careful to use plain words and sentences so that the audience may understand what is said without using much care. The sentence structure should be, therefore, as simple as possible with little modifications. The words used to convey the meaning should not be too many, though, of course, if too few, we cannot catch the meaning easily; the words should be *just* sufficient.

As Narrative, the Old Testament may be more interesting to read than the New Testament. But at present we are going to deal with the New Testament, as it is more familiar to our everyday life and the various kinds of versions are easier to get. Among the books of the New Testament we chose the Gospels, because “their narrative adheres to plainness, directness, and simplicity, the same avoidance of amplification and digressive detail”⁴⁾. Other books, such as Paul’s Epistles, are quite different from the Gospels, “with their complexity of thought and expression, their subtlety of logic, their rhetorical skill, and masterly quality of their style”⁵⁾.

There is a contrast between the fourth Gospel, *John* and the other three Gospels; the former has the long sustained and argumentative discourses of Jesus, while the latter have the brief and simple addresses of the Master recorded by the synoptists. In other words, the Synoptic Gospels seem to have the most distinguished characteristics in the New Testament from the narrative point of view.

The following is not a systematic study, of course, but my notes on those

3) *Loc. cit.*

4) W. H. Hudson, “The Bible as Literature”, *Peck’s Commentary on the Bible* (Thomas Nelsons and Sons, 1920), p. 25.

5) *Loc. cit.*

expressions from past readings of the Gospels.

1. 'And'

And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, *and* the fowls of the air came *and* devoured it up. / *And* some fell on the stony ground, where it had not much earth; *and* immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: / But when the sun was up, it was scorched; *and* because it had no root, it withered away. / *And* some fell among thorns, *and* the thorns grew up, *and* choked it, *and* it yielded no fruit. / *And* other fell on the ground, *and* did yield fruit that sprang up *and* increased; *and* brought forth some thirty, *and* some sixty, *and* some an hundred. (*Mark* 4: 4-8)

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the style of A. V.⁶⁾ is the frequent use of *and*. It can be seen almost everywhere, even in such places as we think unnecessary. Children or uneducated people are apt to use *and*, because it is easier to talk and understand if the elements of sentences were connected with *and*, without using subordinate conjunctions, participial constructions, etc.

In Narrative, where plainness is above all required, *and* is often used, too. It is not skilful, of course, to repeat *and* many a time, because it sometimes tends to become monotonous and diffuse. In some later versions of the Bible, therefore, *and* is often omitted where it seemed unnecessary for understanding.⁷⁾

This frequent use of *and* in A. V. is caused by the faithful translation of the original tongue in which the complicated expression has not yet developed, and the sentences are connected for the most part by the simplest terms, *and*, *now*, and the like. But Wyclif sometimes uses the participial construction, while Tyndale chooses co-ordination, the form which is often found in A. V. Wyclif, being fond of its concise expressiveness, seems to imitate Latin participial construction. The following is an example chosen from *Mark* 4:8—

(Wyclif) And thei *goynge* out fledden fro the sepulcre; forsothe drede

6) Abbreviation for *The Authorized Version* (1611).

7) Cf. M. Shimizu, *The Tradition of the English People and the Bible* (Kenkyusha, 1957), p. 65.

and *quakynge* hadde assaylid em, and to no man thei seiden ony thing, forsoth thei dredden.

(Tyndale) And they went oute quicly and fled from the sepulcre; for they trembled and were amased, nether said they eny thinge to eny man, for they were afrayed.

(A. V.) And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.

Now, let us go back to the paragraph quoted at the beginning. This is the famous parable of a sower told by Jesus. There are 113 words in this paragraph, and *and* is used 16 times; *and* is repeated every 6 words. It is interesting, too, to compare the same stories in *Matthew* and *Luke*. In *Matthew* (13: 4-8) *and* is used 10 times in 90 words; it appears every 8 words. In *Luke* (8: 4-8) it is used 14 times in 120 words; it appears every 7.5 words. Especially in the last two verses (7,8), *and* appears more frequently: in *Mark*, 10 times *and* in 45 words; it is repeated every 3.5 words. The tempo of the sentences seems to become swift and hasty towards the end. We feel we can hear the breath of the speaker.

Looking at the three cases, we found that *and* is most frequently used in *Mark*. Though it is dangerous to judge from this single case, a certain difference of the style of these Gospels may be suggested here. Mark is now generally considered as the earliest writer of our existing Gospels; his style is simple, direct, and at the same time free, unconstrained, forcible, and full of life. On the contrary, Matthew has a tendency to group and classify his material in order to make Jesus' teaching systematic, so that the story itself becomes less important, excluding the superfluous element. Luke is said to be the most literary of all the authors of the New Testament with his fascinating character sketches and the like.

The above examples were given from *Mark*, as it seemed to have the most distinguished characteristic concerning the use of *and*. In the following, however, the examples are mainly chosen from *Luke* for convenience' sake, because on

the whole, words and phrases of the Synoptic Gospels are almost the same, and Luke has especially some narratives peculiar to himself. When not specified, the number in the parentheses in the following examples refers to *Luke*.

2. 'It comes to pass'

And *it came to pass*, that while he executed the priest's office before God in order of his course, (1 : 8) / And *it came to pass*, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. (1 : 23) / And *it came to pass* on the second Sabbath after the first, that he went through the corn fields; (6 : 1) / And *it came to pass*, when the devil was gone out, the dumb spake. (11 : 14)

This formula can also be found everywhere in A. V., and especially used at the beginning of narrative or when the nature of description changes. In N. E. D. it is explained, "to come to be the fact, to come about, to turn out, to happen; esp. in Scriptural language". But speaking from the sense of Present English, we should not attach too much weight to it. For instance, in R. S. V.,⁸⁾ (1 : 8) is written,

Now while he was serving as priests before God,
while Wyclif wrote,

Sothli it was don, whanne Sacharie was set in presthod, in the order of
his sort before God,
and Tyndale,

Hit cam to passe, as he executed the prestes office, before God as his
course cam,...

Tyndale also used another construction in (2 : 1), "Hit folowed in thoose dayes, that there went oute a commaundment...", and in (6 : 1), "Hit happened on an aftersaboth, they went...", while Wyclif always used "it is don, ...". In Basic English⁹⁾ it is rather faithfully but somewhat redundantly translated, and the

8) Abbreviation for *The Revised Standard Version* (1946).

9) *The New Testament in Basic English* (Cambridge, 1944).

phrase 'it comes about' is usually used.

At any rate, the formula 'it comes to pass' can be said to be one of the characteristics of narrative style together with the frequent use of 'and'. It prepares the next narration or gives a kind of expectation to the audience when the speaker finishes one story. This seems to be peculiar to A. V. and it almost disappears from R. S. V. for the purpose of making the style clearer and more rational.

After this formula there always follow conjunctions indicating the time like *as, when, while*, etc., or adverbial phrases containing the course of time such as 'in those days' (2 : 1), 'on the second Sabbath' (6 : 1) and the like.

There are instances, however, in which 'it comes to pass' is used in the original sense, i.e. 'it happens...'

Let us...see this thing which is *come to pass*, (2 : 15) / And when ye see the south wind blow, ye say, There will be heat; and *it comes to pass*. (12 : 55) / ...and what sign will there be when these things shall *come to pass*? (21 : 7) / ...and hast not known the things which are *come to pass*. (24 : 18)

In R. S. V. 'to happen' (2 : 15, 12 : 55, 24 : 18) and 'to be about to take place' (21 : 7) are used, while in Basic English, 'so it is' (12 : 55) and 'to take place' (24 : 18). It is noteworthy that all these examples except (12 : 55) are found in the subordinate clauses. Tyndale uses the form 'it happened' instead of 'hit folowed' or 'hit cam to passe' which are used in the principal clauses.

3. 'Anticipatory *there*'

There appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the alter of incense. (1 : 11) / *There* went out decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (2 : 1) / And, behold, *there* talked unto him two men, which were Moses and Elias : (9 : 30) / *there* came down a storm of wind on the lake; (8 : 23) / when *there* were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people,...he began to say unto his

disciple, (12 : 1) / *there* met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off. (17 : 12)

The *there*-construction with the verb *be* is so common in A. V. that the examples are not given above. As a part of speech, *there* is an adverb, but from the functional point of view, it is rather an 'empty-word', as Jespersen called it. He also called it the 'preparatory *there*'¹⁰⁾, Kruisinga, the 'introductory *there*'¹¹⁾, and Curme, the 'anticipatory *there*'¹²⁾ (cf. 'anticipative' in N. E. D.). Though Jespersen criticized the term 'anticipatory' or 'preparatory' as misleading,¹⁴⁾ we would like to use the term given by Curme, because it seems to be expressive of a characteristic as narrative style.

The inverted order of 'Subject and Verb' is not caused by *there*, but by the lingering form of the old narrative, since in narrative the idea of action becomes prominent.

Curme appropriately explains the development of *there* as follows: "Since, however, this word-order with the verb in the first place had even in O. E. become intimately associated with the idea of question, it gradually became normal usage to place an adverb before the verb to differentiate narrative from interrogation. Thus by a simple device we can still in narrative keep the verb near the beginning of the sentence."¹⁵⁾

There, thus began to be used, not only to put the verb near the head of the sentence in narrative style, but also to emphasize beforehand the subject which comes after the verb. When we want to call special attention to the subject we often withhold it for a while, causing the feeling of suspense. Looking at the instances quoted above, we notice that the verb introduced by *there* is in most cases a copula. Besides the verb *be*, in *Luke*, *come* is most frequently used, about 25%, and *go*, about 14%.

10) O. Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar* (Copenhagen, 1949), Part VII, 3.11.

11) O. Jespersen, *Essentials of English Grammar* (London, 1933), 10.82.

12) Kruisinga, *A Handbook of Present-Day English* (Groningen, 1931), §. 2078.

13) G. O. Curme, *Syntax* (Boston, 1931) 4, II, C.

14) Jespersen, *M.E.G.* VII, 3. 13.

15) Curme, *op. cit.*

When the subject has an emphatic force, or consists of the important group of words, *there* is often used at the beginning of the sentence, and the specific gravity of the sentence lies in the latter part. In R.S.V. *there* is often omitted and the order of 'Subject and Verb' is kept. For instance, (9 : 30) was changed to "And, behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elias, who appeared in glory and spake of his departure." Here the close relation of 'two men' and 'Moses and Elias' may become dilute and the impression to the audience, weaker.

It is interesting that Wyclif, too, rarely uses anticipatory *there*, i. e. "And loo! tweye men spaken with him, forsothe Moyese and Elye weren seyn in magest;" (9 : 30). And here Tyndale also does not use *there*, i. e. "And behold! two men talked with him, and they Moses and Helias, which apered gloriously;" though in other places he often uses *there*.

Jespersen says, "...in comparing the A. V. with the Greek original I was struck with the frequency of *there*, where the Gk had the word-order VS"¹⁶⁾.

It may be possible to say that the so-called 'anticipatory *there*' is also one of the characteristics of A. V. from the narrative point of view.

4. Inversion

One of the most typical characteristics of Modern English is that due to the loss of inflection, the word-order has become fixed. The relation of each word is explained by its order in the sentence, which is balanced under the control of the speaker's intellect and emotion.

But when we want to give an emphatic force to a certain word we put it in the prominent position instead of in the regular order. An emotional colour is predominant here and a new inner rhythm is produced.

In the following, we will give the examples which seem to be peculiar to A. V. and represent some characteristics as narrative.

A. *Then came also publicans* to be baptized, and said unto him, what shall

16) Jespersen, *M.G.E.* VII, 3.2d.

we do? (3 : 12) / *Then went the devils* out of them, and entered into the swine : (8 : 33) / *Then answered one of the lawyers*, and said unto him. (11 : 45) / *Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners* for to hear him. (15 : 1)

In Modern English, the adverb *then* often causes the inversion as *there*, but here it has little function as an adverb and seems to be closer to the 'empty-word'; we call to mind 'anticipatory *there*'. It is interesting to compare this with other versions. Let us look at R. V. Here, 'anticipatory *there*' is used, i. e. "there came also publicans to be baptized, ..." (3 : 12). In R. S. V. neither *then* nor *there* is used, but the order of 'Subject and Verb' is kept, i. e. "Taxcollectors also came...". Wyclif uses the regular order, too, i. e. "Sothli and pupplicans camen...", and Tyndale has the same order as A. V. In (8 : 33), (11 : 45) and (15 : 1), R. V. uses the same construction as R. S. V. It seems, therefore, that A. V. and Tyndale use this colourless *then* as a word which introduces the sentence, and inverted the regular order.

When such an adverb of reason as *therefore* comes at the beginning, an inversion often takes place in A. V. Let us compare A. V. with R. S. V.

- (A. V.) 1. I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also; for *therefore am I sent*. (4 : 43)
2. For they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchers. *Therefore also said the wisdom of God*, I will send them prophets and apostles, (11 : 49)
3. And he was angry, and would not go in: *therefore came his ather* out, and intreated him. (15 : 28)

- (R. S. V.) 1a. I must preach...; for I was sent for this purpose.
- 2a. for they killed them,.....Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send...'
- 3a. But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,

As to the instance when the emphatic adverbial phrase comes at the beginning, we find :

“And he said unto him, *Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant.*” (19 : 22)

This is also changed to the regular order in R. S. V. :

“He said to him, ‘I will condemn you out of your own mouth, you wicked servant!’”

From the psychological point of view, ‘thee’ is in appositive relation with ‘thou wicked servant’, so that the relationship between the two is more closely related in the context of A. V. than in that of R. S. V.

B. Thou shalt worship the Lord the God, and *him* only shalt thou serve. (4 : 8) / And Herod said, *John have I beheaded* : (9 : 9) / And he said, *This will I do* : I will pull down my barns, and build greater. (12 : 18) / And seek ye not what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, For *all these things do the nations of the world seek after* : (12 : 30)

The object placed at the head of the sentence draws the verb immediately after it, both being intimately connected.

Let us look at (12 : 30). “All these things” is placed at the beginning in close connection with the preceding clause “what ye shall eat and drink”. If we put it in the regular order as in R. S. V., i.e. “...For all the nations of the world seek these things;”, the speaker’s tone which is somewhat irritating and pressing may be lost and become commonplace. By the way, Wyclif wrote “Forsoth folkis of the world seken alle thes thingis’, while Tyndale put it as “For all suche thynges the hethen people of the world seke for;”. It cannot be denied that the latter is more expressive.

In (4 : 8), it is clear that ‘him’ comes at the head following ‘the Lord of the God’ which comes at the end of the preceding clause. Here the speaker seems to lay stress on the uniqueness of ‘him’ by the use of ‘only’.

In (9 : 9), the speaker expresses his will vaguely and inclusively at first, and then he describes it concretely as it comes to his mind. R. S. V. changes this order to “I will do this”, and Wyclif, too, uses, “I schal do this thing.”.

There are, of course, some other interesting instances of inversion, e. g. a tendency to put the impressive adjective at the head, etc., but they have been

omitted here, because it seemed not to be peculiar to A. V.

As we have seen, the inversion in older English has gradually lost its vitality and the order of words became fixed in Present English. The connection of each word became rational and clear but the emotional nuance of the speaker seems to be lost.

5. Anacoluthic expression

Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but *whosoever* will lose his life..., *the same* shall save it. (9 : 24) / *he* that is least among you all, *the same* shall be great. (9 : 48) / *Whosoever* shall confess me before men, *him* shall the Son of man also confess before the angel of the Lord. (12 : 8, 9) / *he* that hath a purse, let *him* take it, and likewise his scrip: and *he* that hath no sword, let *him* sell his garment, and buy one. (22 : 36)

The speaker often puts the words which indicate the most prominent idea in the beginning without much consideration. And afterwards, when he is going to construct the sentence the unity is already broken; if he desires to make the sentence logical he must recant over again.

These are, however, quite natural to the speaker's psychology, and it is used so commonly in the old and middle ages that we do not feel it strange.

The above examples are the words which Jesus told his disciples or crowds. These words contain an eschatological and paradoxical tone with some rebuke. His emotion becomes too much excited to give unity to his sentences; we may consider it as coming from the contextual necessity of attaching more importance to the meaning of sentence than to its form.

All these expressions are changed to a more logical style in R. S. V., i.e. (22 : 36), "let him who has a purse take it". The rhythm and tone in which Jesus is speaking and the delicate movement of his emotion seems to be lost in its too rational construction.

'The same' which is visible in (9 : 24) and (9 : 48) is now only used in the legal document, but in older English, it is used as an equivalent of personal pronouns, such as *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*, etc. In (9 : 24), R. S. V. only changed 'the

same' into 'he' leaving the redundant subject, i.e. "Whosoever will lose his life..., he will save it." In (9 : 48) it omitted 'the same', i.e. "He who is least among you all, is the one who is great."

On the other hand, Tyndale often has a decisive influence on the English of A. V. and Wyclif, unexpectedly, shows a logical construction, i.e. —

forwhi he that schal leese his lyf for me, shal it saaf. (9 : 24) / he that is lesse among you alle, is the more. (9 : 48) / ech man which euer shal knoleche me byfore men, and mannis some schal knowleche him (12 : 8, 9, exception) / he that hath a sache, take also and a scrippe. (22..36)

As in other cases, the construction of the older period is more appropriate to psychological facts, while the modern one is regulated by logical conception. The psychology of words does not always consent to their logic; they are alive and moving. But in everyday speech, we are often talking without much consciousness and making mistakes which cannot be corrected afterwards. And the Bible, which has the typical characteristics of narrative, seems to have such a tendency in itself.

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As we have seen, there are some differences in the style of the English versions of the Bible. Wyclif's English is rather stilted and literary, having been translated word-for-word from the Vulgate Version. He seems to have little or no consideration of the idiomatic differences between the Latin and English tongues. It has neither the rhythmical flow nor the pliable beauty of the Authorized Version.

On the contrary, Tyndale is a master of simple and forceful English. This, combined with exactness and breadth of scholarship, lead him to translate the Greek Testament into English, which largely determined the character, form and style of the Authorized Version. He avoids the Latin derivatives, and generally uses the terse, expressive Saxon terms and plain idiomatic English known by all people.

The Revised Version of 1881 is more accurate in translating the original tongue than the Authorized Version, but its English is lacking in unity and loses

some of the beauty and power of the Authorized Version.

Comparing the Revised Standard Version of 1946 with the Authorized Version, we find a definite word-order and a tendency towards the short-syntax of Modern English. Though it has acquired the law of economy and the preciseness of meaning, it has, on the other hand, lost the suggestive nuance of simple words.

In the Authorized Version, we often observe unintelligible passages, illogical constructions and archaic expressions; it is not the refined style, which is the characteristic of the eighteenth century prose. But there is a noble naturalness which not only covers up these defects but also elevates the atmosphere of simple narrative style.

We do not intend to mean, of course, that the narrative style is the most important or remarkable characteristic of the Authorized Version. However, as stated above, because of its naive expressiveness, we have examined some of its features.

It seems that it would be interesting and significant to trace the influence of the narrative style of the Authorized Version upon subsequent English literature. But my reading experience is too poor at present to study it systematically, so I will leave it to another time.