

The King James Version of the Bible

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper
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The King James Version was completed in 1611 as an attempt to have the Church of England use one Bible translation rather than the several which were in use at the time. As the years went by it became the primary version used in the English speaking world for hundreds of years. It is an excellent, literal translation that has served the church well for many years. The translators provided a great service to the church by producing such a fine work in light of their limited resources.

Yet over time language changes. This is one reason for the popularity of more modern translations such as the New American Standard Bible, the New King James Version and the New International Version. Many have found the King James Version to be written in a style and with vocabulary that has become archaic. Not only has the style become difficult for today's reader, many of the words have lost or changed their meaning (e.g. suffer, quick, allege, let, conversation). This becomes more significant when we learn of the KJV translators desired the Word of God to be readable for the common person. They write in the preface to the first edition, "But we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, as in the language of Canaan, that it may be understood even of the very vulgar [common person]."

Yet others have grown up reading the King James Version and prefer its style over all other translations, though they are not opposed to other translations. We have no desire to change the choice of the KJV for those who continue to enjoy its style.

Unfortunately a small but vocal minority claim the King James Version is the only true Bible version available, making the use of it a test for theological orthodoxy. Some of the active proponents of this view use fiery words to attack those who disagree with them, thus making the issue of which Bible translation is used even more volatile.

In particular, some of the more conservative and better English translations have been targeted whenever they deviate from the reading of the KJV. The basic argument puts the KJV side by side with other translations to show them to have deviated from the standard. Most fundamental Christian doctrines, such as the Deity of Christ, are then described as having been corrupted by modern translations.

However, the issue at hand in Bible translation is not which translation is best for supporting certain doctrinal beliefs, but which translation best reflects the original text. It is interesting to note that this comparison of doctrinal teaching between the KJV and translations such as the New International Version and the New American Standard Bible only cuts one way. To no surprise, there are many cases where the NIV and NASB translate verses in a way which support orthodox doctrines, such as the Deity of Christ, more clearly (e.g. John 1:18; Romans 9:5;

Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:13). This certainly demonstrates there is no attempted conspiracy by modern translations to corrupt doctrine. While some versions do have an intent to oppose true Christian doctrine, such as the New World Translation, this is not true conservative evangelical translations.

Why the KJV is not the only true Bible translation

If the King James Version is the only true Bible, what was God's true Word before 1611? There were many English Bibles used by the people at the time of the publication of the King James Version, such as Wycliffe's, Tyndale's, the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible. Were any of these inspired by God? If so then the KJV is not the only true Bible and if not, then those who lived in 1610 and before could not possess a true Bible. And why choose the King James Version as the standard from among these?

If the King James Version is the only true Bible, is English the only language that has God's inspired Word? Do people who speak other languages have to learn English in order to read the King James Version? Or can the Bible be translated into their language? Amazingly, some people have actually translated the KJV into other languages, instead of translating from the original language.

If the King James Version is the only inspired Bible, which edition of it is the absolute standard? After the first edition in 1611, subsequent editions were produced in 1612 and 1613. Over the years many editions were printed, each with slight changes in the wording of the text. The American Bible Society examined six editions of the KJV in the nineteenth century and discovered around 24,000 differences in the text and punctuation. Most KJVs used today follow a revision from 1769 by Benjamin Blayney. Since not every KJV is identical with every other KJV, when they deviate from each other which is the one that is not corrupted?

The KJV translators themselves clearly did not believe they were working on the only inspired English version. In contrast to those who condemn the use of other translations, the KJV translators actually advocated the use of other translations in the preface of their work by writing,

"For as it is a fault of incredulity, to doubt of those things that are evident: so to determine of such things as the Spirit of God hath left (even in the judgment of the judicious) questionable, can be not less than presumption. Therefore, as St. Augustine saith, that *variety of translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense of the Scriptures.*"

The translators also considered other translations to be the Word of God, not just the KJV,

"we do not deny, nay we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English, set forth by men of our profession, (for we have seen none of theirs of the whole Bible as yet) containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God."

Some of the translators used earlier English versions after the publication of the

KJV; even quoting the Geneva Bible in the KJV preface. This also shows that they did not hold to their version as the only reliable text.

The KJV translators also included variant readings in the margins, indicating their uncertainty concerning the correct reading. The original 1611 edition contained 4,223 marginal notes giving a more literal translation and another 2,738 alternative readings that in the opinion of the translators were "not very less probable than those in the text." These marginal readings indicate that the translators did not consider their work to be impossible to be improved upon.

Indeed, they considered the marginal readings to be potentially valid renderings of the original text by writing in the preface of the KJV,

"They that are wise, had rather have their judgments at liberty in differences of reading, than to be captivated to one, when it may be the other."

When the translators finished their work they did not see their translation as being perfected. They considered it wise to improve upon translations by writing,

"Yet before we end, we must answer a third cabil and objection of theirs against us, for altering and amending our translations so oft; wherein truly they deal hardly, and strangely with us. For to whomever was it imputed for a fault (by such as were wise) to go over that which he had done, and amend it where he saw cause?"

Finally, the translators included the Apocrypha in the original King James Version. Few, if any, advocates of the KJV as the only inspired Bible would accept the Apocrypha as inspired. Few even seem to be aware of this fact. If they were consistent, they would include the Apocryphal books as inspired by God.

Why the Textus Receptus is not the only inspired Greek Text

Many who hold to the King James Version as the only true Bible argue their case from the Textus Receptus, under the theory that God must have preserved the original text completely intact. The Textus Receptus (TR) is the Greek text that formed the basis for the NT of the KJV. It developed from a Greek text that was first compiled by Erasmus (1516), then edited by Stephanus, and again edited by Theodore Beza. It was based primarily upon half a dozen Greek manuscripts (a manuscript is a hand written copy of part or all of the Greek New Testament before the invention of the printing press). Each made several updates of their respective works. The KJV translators made the largest use of Beza's editions of 1588-89 and 1598.

In 1633, two decades after the publication of the King James Version, Bonaventure and Matthew Elzevir produced their second edition of the Greek New Testament. This edition mostly followed Beza's work but used other sources as well. In their preface they claimed their Greek text was the "text which is now received by all." The Textus Receptus, Latin for the "received text," was born and is now considered by some to be identical to what was originally penned by the New Testament authors.

Of course, a declaration that this edition of the Greek New Testament is the received text does not make it so. Many of the same problems that come with viewing the KJV as the only inspired Bible are found with the idea of a received text, the Textus Receptus, as the identical replica of the original writings.

First, which text is the "Textus Receptus?" The term was first used by the Greek text produced by the Elzevir brothers, but their text is not identical to other Greek texts. Stephanus' 1550 edition of his Greek text has also been given the designation of Textus Receptus. When the term "Textus Receptus" is used today it normally refers to the Greek text that would reflect those textual choices made by the translators themselves rather than any one edition of a Greek text. Scrivener published a text in 1891 that is considered to be the Greek text that supports the KJV, thus the Textus Receptus.

It is important to emphasize that the KJV translators did not use the Textus Receptus. They used a variety of Greek texts and sometimes favored one text and sometimes another text. Therefore, no single Greek text identical to the Textus Receptus existed at the time of the translation of the KJV. When they finished their translation they did not produce a Greek text that represented their textual decisions in cases where choices were necessary. Others have come behind them and have declared that their choices were providentially guided by God to completely represent the original writings of the biblical authors preserved by God.

In addition, The KJV translators used the same translation methods that are employed by most modern translations today, including the NIV and NASB. They worked by a committee, drew from all the Greek and Hebrew texts available to them rather than one text, and made decisions on which text had the best reading and how best to translate it into English so it would be best understood.

Even Erasmus, whose work set the foundation that others would build upon, compiled his text from several Greek manuscripts, not from a single manuscript. Erasmus could not find a manuscript that contained the entire Greek NT, so he used several for various parts of the New Testament. The oldest was from the tenth century, yet was considered to be the least reliable by Erasmus. Today over 5,300 handwritten manuscripts of all or parts of the Greek New Testament have been discovered, and hundreds that are older than what was available to Erasmus.

Erasmus, like the KJV translators, did a superior job considering the resources that were available to him. However, clearly he was limited. For example, Erasmus had only one manuscript for the book of Revelation, which lacked the final leaf containing the last six verses of the book. For those verses Erasmus relied on the Latin Vulgate translation. This explains why Revelation 22:19 in the KJV reads "the book of life," while every known Greek manuscript read "the tree of life." Yet it is claimed that the KJV has preserved the original Greek text in spite of this obvious error.

Another illustration of the same problem is in Acts 9:6 regarding Paul at the time of his conversion on the Damascus road, "And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This was also added by Erasmus from the Latin

Vulgate. This addition became part of the Textus Receptus, although there is no known Greek manuscript that contains this verse. It is apparently transferred from the parallel account in Acts 22:10. The result is the Textus Receptus includes a Greek sentence absent from all of the 5,300+ known Greek manuscripts. How can this possibly replicate the original text?

Also, the men who worked to compile the Greek texts did not view themselves as producing an inerrant text for they each made several editions to improve their work. Stephanus placed variant readings that he felt to be credible in the margins of his text. Beza offered similar alternate readings. This is not done when there is a conviction regarding the accuracy of a work.

Furthermore, why should the Greek text behind the most widely used English Bible be the correct text? Why not the Greek text behind Martin Luther's German translation (the second edition of Erasmus' text from 1519)? One of the main arguments offered to support the Greek text underlying the KJV is its widespread and long use, which allegedly shows that God has preserved it. If this is compelling proof, then why not the Greek text behind Jerome's Vulgate (Latin)? Jerome's Latin translation has been used for 1,500 years and has been more widely spread.

Those who support the Textus Receptus do so because of their commitment to the KJV. Instead of working from the Greek text to construct a translation, they work backwards from the translation to construct a Greek text from it. Then, in spite of the fact that the resultant Textus Receptus is not identical to any published Greek text or hand written manuscript available at the time of the publication of the KJV in 1611, it is considered to be God's providentially preserved text.

Conclusion

While the King James Version is a solid word-for-word Bible translation, it suffers from two significant weaknesses. First, its style and vocabulary has become difficult for modern readers as the English language has changed over the past 400 years. Second, its translation was based on a few manuscripts rather than the thousands that we now possess. While the methodology of the translators was similar to what is used today, they simply did not have the oldest and best manuscripts available to them. While no doctrinal issues were affected by the limitation of the KJV, even the translators themselves understood that their work could be improved upon as time moved along.

Even if the King James Version is preferred, it is wrong to condemn all modern versions as corrupt because they deviate from the King James Version. It is also wrong to attack those men who have served the church in providing more current translations that assist in understanding the Bible for their work of service. While we do not defend all modern translations or translators, the issue is simply how faithful a translation is to the original text, not whether it differs from the KJV. It is also wrong to judge believers who use translations other than the KJV. God's Word has been preserved, now it must be understood and applied.

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