

Why I Do Not Think the King James Bible Is the Best Translation Available Today

by

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First, I want to affirm with all evangelical Christians that the Bible is the Word of God, inerrant, inspired, and our final authority for faith and life. However, nowhere in the Bible am I told that only one translation of it is the correct one. Nowhere am I told that the King James Bible is the best or only 'holy' Bible. There is no verse that tells me how God will preserve his word, so I can have no scriptural warrant for arguing that the King James has exclusive rights to the throne. The arguments must proceed on other bases.

Second, the Greek text which stands behind the King James Bible is demonstrably inferior in certain places. The man who edited the text was a humanist named Erasmus. He was under pressure to get it to the press as soon as possible since (a) no edition of the Greek New Testament had yet been published, and (b) he had heard that some monks were just about to publish their edition of the Greek New Testament and he was in a race to beat them. Consequently, his edition has been called the most poorly edited volume in all of literature! It is filled with hundreds of typographical errors which even Erasmus would acknowledge. Two places deserve special mention. In the last six verses of Revelation, Erasmus had no Greek manuscript (=MS) (he only used half a dozen, very late MSS for the whole New Testament any way). He was therefore forced to 'back-translate' the Latin into Greek and by so doing he created seventeen variants which have never been found in any other Greek MS of Revelation! He merely guessed at what the Greek might have been. Secondly, for 1 John 5:7-8, Erasmus followed the majority of MSS in reading "there are three witnesses in heaven, the Spirit and the water and the blood." However, there was an uproar in some Roman Catholic circles because his text did not read "there are three witnesses in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit." Erasmus said that he did not put that in the text because he found no Greek MSS which had that reading. This implicit challenge-viz., that if he found such a reading in any Greek MS, he would put it in his text-did not go unnoticed. In 1520, a scribe at Oxford named Roy made such a Greek MS (codex 61, now in Dublin). Erasmus' third edition had the second reading because such a Greek MS was 'made to order' to fill the challenge! To date, only a handful of Greek MSS have been discovered which have the Trinitarian formula in 1 John 5:7-8, though none of them is demonstrably earlier than the sixteenth century.

That is a very important point. It illustrates something quite significant with regard to the textual tradition which stands behind the King James. Probably most textual critics today fully embrace the doctrine of the Trinity (and, of course, all evangelical textual critics do). And most would like to see the Trinity explicitly taught in 1 John 5:7-8. But most reject this reading as an invention of some overly zealous scribe. The problem is that the King James Bible is filled with readings which have been 'created' by overly zealous scribes! Very few of the distinctive King James readings are demonstrably ancient. And most textual critics just happen to embrace the reasonable proposition that the most ancient MSS tend to be more reliable since they stand closer to the date of the autographs. I myself would love to see many of the King James readings retained. The story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11) has always been a favorite of mine about the grace of our savior, Jesus Christ. That Jesus is called God in 1 Timothy 3:16 affirms my view of him. Cf. also John 3:13; 1 John 5:7-8, etc. But when the textual evidence shows me both that scribes had a strong tendency to add, rather than subtract, and that most of these additions are found in the more recent MSS, rather than the more ancient, I find it difficult to accept intellectually the very passages which I have always embraced emotionally. In other words, those scholars who seem to be excising many of your favorite passages from the New Testament are not doing so out of spite, but because such passages are not found in the better and more ancient MSS. It must be emphatically stressed, however, that this does not mean that the doctrines contained in those verses have been jeopardized. My belief in the deity of Christ, for example, does not live or die with 1 Timothy 3:16. In fact, it has been repeatedly affirmed that no doctrine of Scripture has been affected by these textual differences. If that is true, then the 'King James only' advocates might be crying wolf where none exists, rather than occupying themselves with the more important aspects of advancing the gospel.

Third, the King James Bible has undergone three revisions since its inception in 1611, incorporating more than 100,000 changes. Which King James Bible is inspired, therefore?

Fourth, 300 words found in the KJV no longer bear the same meaning-e.g., 'suffer the little children to come unto me.' Should we really embrace a Bible as the best translation when it uses language which not only is not clearly understood any more, but in fact has been at times perverted and twisted?

Fifth, the KJV includes one very definite error in translation, which even KJV advocates would admit. In Matthew 23:24 the KJV has 'strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.' But the Greek has 'strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.' In the least, this illustrates not only that no translation is infallible but also that scribal corruptions can and do take place-even in a volume which has been worked over by so many different hands (for the KJV was the product of a very large committee of over 50 scholars).

Sixth, when the KJV was first published, it was heavily resisted for being too easy to understand! Some people revere it today because it is difficult to understand. I fear that part of their response is due to pride: they feel as though they are able to discern something that other, less spiritual folks cannot. Often 1 Corinthians 2:13-16 is quoted with reference to the KJV (to the effect that 'you would understand it if you were spiritual'). Such a use of that text, however, is a gross distortion of the Scriptures. The words in the New Testament, the grammar, the style, etc.-in short, the language-comprised the common language of the first century. We do God a great disservice when we make the gospel more difficult to understand than He intended it. The reason unspiritual people do not understand the Scriptures is because they have a volitional problem, not an intellectual problem (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14 where 'receive', 'welcome' shows clearly that the thing which blocks understanding is the sinful will of man).

Seventh, those who advocate that the KJV has exclusive rights to being called the Holy Bible are always, curiously, English-speaking people (normally isolated Americans). Yet, Martin Luther's fine translation of the Bible into German predated the KJV by almost 100 years. Are we so arrogant to say that God has spoken only in English? And where there are substantial discrepancies between Luther's Bible and the KJV (such as in 1 John 5:7-8), are we going to say that God has inspired both? Is he the author of lies? Our faith does not rest in a singular tradition, nor is it provincial. Vibrant, biblical Christianity must never unite itself with provincialism. Otherwise, missionary endeavor, among other things, would die.

Eighth, again, let me repeat an earlier point: Most evangelicals-who embrace all the cardinal doctrines of the faith-prefer a different translation and textual basis than that found in the KJV. In fact, even the editors of the New Scofield Reference Bible (which is based on the KJV) prefer a different text/translation!

Finally, though it is true that the modern translations 'omit' certain words and verses (or conversely, the KJV adds to the Word of God, depending on how you look at it), the issue is not black-or-white. In fact, the most recent edition of a Greek New Testament which is based on the majority of MSS, rather than the most ancient ones (and thus stands firmly behind the King James tradition), when compared to the standard Greek New Testament used in most modern translations, excises over six hundred and fifty words or phrases! Thus, it is not proper to suggest that only modern translations omit; the Greek text behind the KJV omits, too! The question, then, is not whether modern translations have deleted portions of the Word of God, but rather whether either the KJV or modern translations have altered the Word of God. I contend that the KJV has far more drastically altered the Scriptures than have modern translations. Nevertheless, I repeat: most textual critics for the past two hundred and fifty years would say that no doctrine is affected by these changes. One can get saved reading the KJV and one can get saved reading the NIV, NASB, etc.

I trust that this brief survey of reasons I have for thinking that the King James Bible is not the best available translation will not be discarded quickly. All of us have a tendency to make mountains out of molehills and then to set up fortresses in those 'mountains.' We often cling to things out of emotion, rather than out of true piety. And as such we do a great disservice to a dying world which is desperately in need of a clear, strong voice proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Soli Deo gloria!

•Addendum

One further point is necessary. With the recent publication of several different books villifying modern translations, asserting that they were borne out of conspiratorial motives, a word should be mentioned about this concocted theory. First, many of these books are written by people who have little or no knowledge of Greek or Hebrew, and are, further, a great distortion of the facts. I have read books on textual criticism for more than a quarter of a century, but never have I seen such illogic, out-of-context quotations, and downright deceptions about the situation as in these recent books. Second, although it is often asserted that heretics produced some of the New Testament MSS we now have in our possession, there is only one group of MSS known to be produced by heretics: certain Byzantine MSS of the book of Revelation. This is significant because the Byzantine text stands behind the KJV! These MSS formed part of a mystery cult textbook used by various early cults. But KJV advocates constantly make the charge that the earliest MSS (the Alexandrian MSS) were produced by heretics. The sole basis they have for this charge is that certain readings in these MSS are disagreeable to them! Third, when one examines the variations be-

tween the Greek text behind the KJV (the Textus Receptus) and the Greek text behind modern translations, it is discovered that the vast majority of variations are so trivial as to not even be translatable (the most common is the moveable nu, which is akin to the difference between 'who' and 'whom!'). Fourth, when one compares the number of variations that are found in the various MSS with the actual variations between the Textus Receptus and the best Greek witnesses, it is found that these two are remarkably similar. There are over 400,000 textual variants among NT MSS. But the differences between the Textus Receptus and texts based on the best Greek witnesses number about 5000-and most of these are untranslatable differences! In other words, over 98% of the time, the Textus Receptus and the standard critical editions agree. Those who villify the modern translations and the Greek texts behind them have evidently never really investigated the data. Their appeals are based largely on emotion, not evidence. As such, they do an injustice to historic Christianity as well as to the men who stood behind the King James Bible. These scholars, who admitted that their work was provisional and not final (as can be seen by their preface and by their more than 8000 marginal notes indicating alternate renderings), would wholeheartedly welcome the great finds in MSS that have occurred in the past one hundred and fifty years.

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