

The Conflict Over Different Bible Versions—Part Four

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In previous articles we introduced our subject by examining what the Bible teaches concerning its own inerrancy, the manner in which God inspired the Bible, and the fact that all translations are neither 100% perfect nor equally competent. Only the prophets and apostles in their original autographs were inerrant. However, the extant copies of their writings can be shown to be 99% accurate. The points where we have their exact words but do not know the exact interpretation of what they said, or those places where questions arise about a word, do not affect any major doctrine of Christianity. There is no reason to doubt we have the inerrant Word of God as the prophets and apostles delivered it to us. We also provided some background on the King James Version Only (KJVO) debate. Now we will examine specific claims and illustrate the errors of the KJVO camp.

Is the King James Version the “only inspired Bible”?

The majority of perceived problems raised by new translations arise from two sources. First, from the misconceptions that people hold about the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. Second, from the lack of understanding concerning how we got our Bible (origin and transmission), the nature of translation work, and the textual data we possess.

The KJV Only people argue that the KJV is the *only* inspired Bible against which every other translation is to be tested. This claim is not only demonstrably false, it ignores the entire issue of biblical origin, transmission and translation.

Let’s examine this claim: The original preface of the KJV translators clearly stated their aims. The translators made no claim their translation was either inspired or perfect. Proof of this can be seen where they set variant readings and marginal notes in the text.

Further, in the original title page of the 1611 Bible they stated, “The Holy Bible, Conteyning the Old Testament, and the New, Newly Translated out of the Originall tongues: & with the former Translations diligently compared and reuised, by his Maiesties Speciall Comandement.” They go on to say that a “varietie of Translation is profitable for the finding out of the sense of the Scriptures.”¹

So they acknowledge that the KJV is a translation and they admit that their committee was not the first to translate the Bible. In fact, they praise many of the earlier translations such as the Septuagint (200 B.C.), Jerome’s *Vulgate* (4th century), the translations into the first European languages and their own English predecessors such as Wycliffe’s (1388), Tyndale’s (1526, NT), the Geneva Bible (1560), Bishop’s Bible (1568) and those of Coverdale (1540), Taverner (1539), “Matthew” (1537), etc.

“We are so farre off from condemning any of their labours that travailed before us in this....” Then they go on to say that their purpose was to put the Word of God into the common language of the people so that it would be *understandable*. They asked: “But how shall men meditate in that which they cannot understand?”²

So the KJV translators themselves would hardly object to modern translations having the very same purpose as theirs. To argue the KJV is the **only** acceptable translation is ridiculous in light of the statements of the very scholars who produced it.

What about the claim that the 1611 edition of the King James Bible alone is “the Word of God”?

Understanding the background of the KJV will help us see why this argument is also not true. How did we get the KJV?

In making the translation, the dozens of translators used the 1516 Greek text of Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus took less than a year to produce his text based on portions of only five or six late manuscripts. In addition, his work was produced in haste in order to be the *first* to actually *publish* a Greek New Testament. Not surprisingly, given the conditions under which he worked, the various editions of his text are, collectively, filled with a large number of corrections. Both Stephanus and Beza revised his text and it is *this* Greek text that was used by the KJV translators to produce the 1611 first edition of the King James Bible.

It was not until 1624 that Elzevir put out his *own* edition (little more than a reprint of Beza’s 1565 text). In the *second* edition (1633) he claimed that it was the text “best received of all.” This “received text,” known as the *Textus Receptus*, becomes the textual basis for the KJV New Testament; yet it differs from the Erasmus text in a few hundred minor instances.

The King James translators used the same basic principles employed by modern translators and their skill and scholarship gave us what became the standard English Bible for 400 years. But the 1611 edition was not inerrant. For example, the original 1611 edition included the apocryphal books; these even remained in the KJV until the 19th Century. Given the numerous theological and/or historical errors in the Apocrypha, would any KJVO writer today argue such a Bible was inerrant?

Also, people do not realize that a number of minor revisions of the KJV have been made over the years. These revisions incorporated corrections of printing and translation errors included in 1612, 1613, 1616, 1629, 1638 and six different editions in the 1650s. In fact, there were two slightly different 1611 editions. These different versions prove the KJV (from 1611 on) contained a few translation and other errors and, therefore, cannot be considered an inerrant translation.³

Based upon further archaeological research of the time period in which Jesus lived, as well as ancient history in relationship to Israel, word usage continues to be clarified. Also, earlier manuscripts, some going back to within 200 years of the Apostles, further clarify the exact words that were in the text. Here are some examples of errors that still remain in the KJV and haven’t been corrected:

- “My sore ran in the night” (Ps. 77:2) should be “my hand was stretched out”....
- “observed him” (Mark 6:20) should be “preserved him”....
- “Pineth away” (Mark 9:18) should be “becomes rigid”....
- “Touch me not” (John 20:17) should be “Do not keep on holding me”....
- “Abstain from all appearance of evil” (1 Thess. 5:22) should be “every form of evil”....
- “For in many things we offend all” (James 3:2) should be “in many things we all offend”....

Examples of how archaeological study has clarified the meaning of some words that were unclear in 1611 include:

Pharaoh Necho went “to aid” the king of Assyria, not [be] “against” him (2 Kings 23:29). It

seemed normal in seventeenth century England to translate “light a candle” (Matt. 5:15; Luke 15:8) and to set the candle on a “candlestick,” but the oil lamp—not the candle—was the light source in ancient Palestine. Men “reclined” at the table rather than “sitting” at it, they used “wineskins” rather than “bottles,” wore “sandals” rather than “shoes,” and had “ointment in flasks” instead of in “boxes.”...⁴

Finally, mythical animals, such as the unicorn (Deut. 33:17; Ps. 22:21; Isa. 34:7, etc.), the satyr (Isa. 13:21; 34:14), the dragon (Deut. 32:33; Ps. 44:19, etc.), and the cockatrice (Isa. 11:8; 14:29; 59:5; Jer. 8:17) represent translations acceptable to men in 1611, but today these translations have either been corrected or it is admitted the exact meaning is unknown. Thus, unicorns become “wild oxen,” satyrs become “wild goats,” a term connected with the demonic “goat idols” in Leviticus 17:7; cockatrice becomes “snake” or “viper.”

All of this proves that the King James Version now in use in many of our churches is not a perfect translation.

Consider some more examples of the difference between the 1611 edition and our modern KJV. In 1611 the KJV had “Then cometh Judas” in Matthew 26:36. Today it is rendered in the KJV as, “Then cometh Jesus.” Wouldn’t you say this is a rather big difference?

Embarrassingly, the 1613 printing omitted the word “not” from the seventh commandment, inadvertently “encouraging” people to commit adultery. This King James edition became known as the “Wicked Bible.” Another printing of the KJV became known as the “Unrighteous Bible” because it stated that “the *unrighteous* will inherit the kingdom of heaven”.⁵

Although these were printers’ errors, they also prove that the 1611 and subsequent editions were not perfect. They were only translations.

What About the Ancient Manuscripts of the Bible?

The error of those who defend the KJV Only is that they assume there is only *one* family of manuscripts (the Byzantine or Majority Text) and one pure text (the KJV translation) which are to act as the ultimate standard in deciding the proper variant readings from the thousands of Greek manuscripts and thus what is to become the best Bible.

But scholars have catalogued manuscripts into basic geographical “families” or types, which share certain characteristics and/or common readings that separate them from other manuscripts. The three basic families are the Alexandrian (from Egypt), the Western (Roman) and the Byzantine (from Constantinople). Generally, the Alexandrian family contains the fewest and earliest manuscripts whereas the Byzantine contains the later and great majority of manuscripts.

Why do the vast majority of Evangelical scholars accept the readings of the *minority* earlier manuscripts rather than the readings of the *majority* later manuscripts? Simply because the closer one proceeds to the original autographs, the less time exists for corruption. KJVO advocates have never argued successfully that the later manuscripts are, in fact, the most accurate.

Rather than assuming without evidence that only one family of manuscripts has been divinely protected by God, isn’t it better to weigh *all* the evidence in order to produce the best translation possible? This is known as the eclectic approach. It assumes that no single

manuscript or family of manuscripts is perfect, since none were divinely inspired like the original autographs. Thus, manuscripts must be weighed in terms of their overall value not just counted by number.

Notes:

¹ Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), p. 37.

² *Ibid.*, 36

³ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 37–38.