

How Reliable is Our Bible (5)

Last week, we discussed the history of the English Bible. We concluded by taking a brief look at the King James Version. Although there were a few revisions, the last one being in 1769, the KJV became the most widely used English translation for almost 300 years. I think it would be safe to say that a majority of Christians still use the KJV. Many brethren prefer this version because they grew up with it, have memorized many passages from it, and find it hard to switch to the newer versions. Others have embraced the *New American Standard Version*, the *New King James Version*, the *New International Version*, or the *Revised Standard Version*. Which version a person chooses to use is a matter of personal judgment. This author has no problem with those who hold to the King James Version. However, there are a few who believe that Christians may ONLY use the King James Version because it is the “perfect” will of God. Your author does have a problem with that.

There is no “perfect” translation. All translations have some faults and inconsistencies. Most of the problems are not crucial enough to compromise doctrinal integrity. No doubt, the message of the gospel has been preserved, as God said it would. (Psa. 119:89) For the remainder of this article we wish to discuss some of the problems with the King James Version. Remember, many of the errors in the KJV occur simply because the translators did not properly understand the Greek & Hebrew languages. Gary Kerr has written, *Hebrew especially was a very poorly understood language in the early seventeenth century. Diligent study and new study aids have greatly improved scholarly knowledge of the Old Testament.*

Textual Problems

Here are a few examples of mistranslations in the KJV:

Gen. 1:28—“replenish the earth” should be “fill the earth.”

Exo. 32:25—“For Aaron had made them naked unto their shame.” should be “for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame.”

1 Kings 20:38—the prophet did not disguise himself “with ashes upon his face,” but rather with a bandage/headband over his eyes.

In some cases, a mistranslation can result in a meaning exactly the opposite of what was originally intended. For example, the 70 elders prophesied and “did not cease,” in Numbers 11:25. It should be translated that they prophesied but “they never did so again.”

Lk. 19:13—the nobleman did not charge his servants to “occupy” until he returned, but rather to “trade” or “do business until I come.”

Acts 12:4—“Easter” should be translated “Passover.”

2 Cor. 9:13—“The experiment of this ministration” should read “the proof of this ministry.”

The King James Version rests on an inadequate textual base according to Neil Lightfoot. He observes, “This is especially true with reference to the Greek text for the New Testament. The text underlying the KJV was essentially a medieval text embodying a number of scribal mistakes that had accumulated through the years. Most of these textual variations were small in significance and did not affect materially the Bible message, but others were included which deserve no place in the Holy Scriptures.” (p.72) The translators of 1611 are not at fault here however. Five of the oldest manuscripts were not used. The Alexandrian and Vatican texts were known to exist, but were not available to the translators. Three other manuscripts (Sinaiticus, Beatty papyri, and Bodmer papyri) had not yet been discovered. (Kerr) We also know in the 1700’s that Greek and Hebrew had not been subjects of serious study for very long.

Lightfoot says that the translators were confronted with “puzzling problems.” He notes two scriptures which bear the problems out. For example Mk. 6:20 says that Herod put John the Baptist in prison to “observe him.” What is meant is that he “kept him safe.” “Abstain from all appearance of evil” is the way the KJV treats I Thess. 5:22. A more correct rendering would be “Abstain from every form of evil.” (p. 73)

In the late 1800’s and 1900’s a number of Egyptian papyrus documents were discovered in ancient garbage dumps. Many of the papyrus documents helped explain the meaning of some new testament words. These discoveries have made some major contributions to our ability to accurately translate the Bible. One example of this is in Acts 12:13. The 1611 translators write “a damsel came to hearken.” when Peter knocked at the door. Why would she come just to listen? We now know that the word translated “hearken” meant to the Greeks what our word “answer” means to us, and that is how the word should be translated. Another example is found in John 12:6. Judas did not put the money in a “bag,” but in a “box.” Remember, most of the errors mentioned thus far have no significant doctrinal effect on the text. But, it is obvious that the KJV has some shortcomings. Kerr has observed, “The KJV remains one of the truly remarkable productions in the history of Bible translation, as well as English literature.” (p. 4)

Difficulties in Legibility

Compare and contrast the following scriptures:

In Genesis 25:29 the KJV says, “And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint.” The NASV says “And when Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished.” Which is easier to understand?

In Psalm 5:6 the KJV says, “Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man.” The NASV says, “You destroy those who speak falsehood; The LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.” Which is easier to understand?

In 2 Cor. 8:1 the KJV says “we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia.” The NASV says, “we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia,” Which is easier to understand?

In 2 Cor. 6:12 the KJV says, “Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels.” The NASV says, “You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections.” Which is easier to understand?

Finally, In Ecc. 12:11 the KJV says, “The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.” The NASV says, “The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd.” Again, which is easier to understand?

(to be continued...)

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