

7 things you may not know about the King James Bible

By Margaret Mowczko

The King James Version of the Bible is a great translation and has helped countless thousands of people to find and know God, to receive his gift of salvation, and to effectively serve him and his people. The Bible was beautifully written by some of the best scholars of the day, and its reputation as fine literature is deserved.

Some Christians today maintain that the KJV is the superior English translation. Some Christians and churches are so enamoured with the KJV that they refuse to use, or give credit to, any other Bible. The stance of these Christians has been referred to as King-James-Onlyism .

The KJV is an excellent English Bible and if you can easily understand it there is no real reason to change to another English translation. However, one of the biggest shortcomings for most people is its dated language.

The KJV uses many archaic words: words such as “jangling”, “subtil”, “privily”, and “holpen”, etc. And it uses archaic expressions that are unfamiliar to modern readers and audiences. For instance, how many people readily understand “Charity vaunteth not itself” (1 Cor. 13:4c). The earlier editions of the KJV also used spelling that is outdated, such as *sunne* for “sun”. Moreover, the edition of the KJV that is still commonly used contains several words which have changed in meaning over time. Words such as “suffer”, “vile”, “conversation” and “quit” convey a very different meaning to modern readers than was intended by the translators. (See Matt. 19:14 KJV; Phil. 3:20-21 KJV; 1 Cor. 16:13 KJV, etc.) The fact that the KJV uses the word “[unicorn](#)” nine times in the Old Testament is also problematic, as a unicorn is regarded as a mythological creature rather than a real animal.

Apart from its dated language, there are a few other shortcomings of the KJV. KJV-only people seem unaware of these shortcomings. Moreover, many accept incorrect statements that are frequently made about the KJV. The following paragraphs contain seven pieces of information that some KJV-only Christians may not be aware of.

(1) The KJV was not the first English translation.

A few King-James-Only Christians believe that the King James Bible was the first English translation of the Scriptures. This is incorrect. John Wycliffe’s Bible was translated from Latin into English and hand copied in the 1400s. In 1526, almost 100 years before the KJV was first published, William Tyndale’s English translation of the Greek New Testament was published. “After Tyndale’s, a number of other versions were produced. Among them were the Coverdale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops’

Bible.”[1] In fact much of the KJV borrows heavily from earlier English translations, especially the Bishop’s Bible.

(2) The KJV has been revised several times.

Some King-James-Only Christians believe that the King James Bible perfectly preserved the Scriptures for all time. If this is the case there would have been no need for further edits. The current edition of the KJV is different from the original 1611 translation and several other early editions. “The KJV Bible we use today is actually based primarily on the major revision completed in 1769 - 158 years after the first edition.”[2]

(3) All early editions of the KJV contained the apocryphal books.

The 1611 version, and all other editions of the KJV that were published for the next fifty years, contained the [Apocrypha](#). Protestant Christians do not regard the apocryphal books as uniquely inspired and authoritative. The 1666 edition was the first edition of the KJV that did *not* include these extra books that are not included in the canon of Holy Scripture.

(4) King James authorised the new Bible translation for political reasons.

King James believed that a single ‘Authorized Version’ was a political and social necessity. He hoped this book would hold together the warring factions of the Church of England and the Puritans which threatened to tear apart both church and country.[3] Most of the translators, however, were clergymen belonging to the Church of England, but at least some had Puritan sympathies.

King James issued over a dozen rules that the translators had to follow. King James disliked the Geneva Bible, the Bible used by the Puritans, because he believed that some of the commentary in the margin notes did not show enough respect for kings.[4] James' new translation was to have no commentary in the margins.

King James favoured the hierarchical structure of the Church of England and wanted the new translation to keep words that supported a bishop led hierarchy. In keeping with James' preferred views on church government he specified, "The old ecclesiastical words [are] to be kept; as the word *church* [is] not to be translated *congregation*." (I personally believe that *congregation* is a better translation in some instances.) King James also ruled that only his new Bible could be read in England's churches. The translation rules of King James can be found [here](#). The political motives of King James had a direct influence on the translation of the KJV.

(5) The translators of the KJV 1611 were untrained in Koine Greek.

Koine (common) Greek is the original language of the New Testament. Koine Greek had been a dead language for over a thousand years when the KJV was published for the first time in 1611. The translators of the KJV didn't even know what Koine Greek was. Some people believed that the Greek language of the NT was a unique Spirit-inspired dialect.[5] It was not until the late 1800s and during the 1900s, when tens of thousands of papyri documents were discovered - many written in Koine, that we could begin to understand the language more fully.[6] Unlike the translators of the KJV, modern translators of the New Testament are scholars of Koine Greek.

(6) The KJV translation of the NT is based on relatively recent Greek manuscripts.

As well as relying on previous English translations, the 1611 edition of the KJV relied on a critically edited Greek text that was "for the most part based on about half a dozen very late manuscripts (none earlier than the 12th century AD)."[7] These late manuscripts include editions of the Greek New Testament by Erasmus[8], as well as Robert Estienne's (a.k.a. 'Stephanus') edition (1550), and Theodore Beza's edition (1598). Unfortunately, one of the manuscripts Estienne and Beza used for their Greek editions contained a few "corrections" that downplayed the importance of women in the church.[9]

(7) The early editions of the KJV are not based on the Received Text.

Most KJV advocates claim that the KJV was translated from a Greek text known as the Textus Receptus (TR) and that the TR is especially accurate and inspired. However the TR did not exist in 1611 when the first King James Bible was published. The first TR was written in the 1633. "The TR used today is normally the one created by Scrivener in 1894, which took as its basis the English translation of the KJV, giving the reader the Greek textual choices made by the KJV translators." [10] Conversely, most modern translations of the New Testament are based on critical texts which take into account much more ancient, and much less handled, Greek manuscripts. A few of these Greek manuscripts date from as early as the third century.

Other Criticisms and Considerations

One of the criticisms levelled at some newer English translations is that the New Testament was translated from the Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament. However, the 2011 edition of the New International Version (NIV) is based on the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland/United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament which is a critical text that takes into consideration all known Greek manuscripts, and lectionary quotes, of the New Testament.[11] Any criticism of the Westcott and Hort text, or the men themselves - and much of the criticism has been misleading and outright slander - has no relevance whatsoever to the latest edition of the NIV and other modern translations.

Another criticism of newer translations is that some words and phrases, and even a few passages, that are included in the KJV are absent in newer translations. These are not omissions. Rather, these words and phrases are additions in the KJV. These additions are absent in the more ancient Greek manuscripts. Most modern translations still acknowledge the traditional additions in some way (e.g. margin notes, footnotes, or in a different font, etc.)

The King James Version is a good translation, but I believe the NIV (2011) to be better. I mostly read the New Testament in Greek, but the English translations I use, roughly in order of preference, are: the NIV (2011), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the King James Version (KJV). Most of the other, better known English translations are fine too.

It is most important that we read a Bible that we can understand. The New Testament was originally written in common, everyday Greek - a language that almost everyone in the Roman Empire (the world of the New Testament) could easily understand. We need modern English translations of the Bible for modern audiences.

So much more can be said, and has been said by others, on this topic. More information is [here](#). A video series is [here](#).

Endnotes

[1] Rick Wade, "The Debate over the King James Version", Probe Ministries International, 1998 ([Source](#))

[2] Jack P. Lewis, The English Bible From KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation (Grand Rapids, MI:Baker, 1984), p. 39. Quoted [here](#).

[3] This paragraph uses information from N.T. Wright, "The Monarchs and the Message: Reflections on Bible Translation from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Century", presented at SBL 2011 ([Source](#))

[4] "For example, a note in the margin beside Exodus 1 said the Hebrew midwives in the time of baby Moses were right to disobey the Egyptian king's order to kill newborn baby boys. And a note beside 2 Chronicles 15 criticized King Asa for not executing his idol-worshipping mother." Stephen M. Miller and Robert V. Huber, "The Bible: A History" (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2003) p.178.

[5] Greek scholar Bill Mounce writes, "For a long time Koine Greek confused many scholars. It was significantly different from Classical Greek. Some hypothesized that it was a combination of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Others attempted to explain it as a "Holy Ghost language", meaning that God created a special language just for the Bible. But studies of Greek papyri found in Egypt over the past one hundred years have shown that this language was the language of the every day people . . ." "The Basics of Biblical Greek" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993, 2003) p. 1.

[6] Before the discovery of the papyri documents in Egypt and elsewhere, the only thing available in Koine Greek was the New Testament. But now we have numerous letters, business receipts, census statements, novels, and other writings that were written in the language of the New Testament. We can now compare the language of the New Testament with these other writings to see how words were used in the first century. Among the discoveries were ancient manuscripts of the biblical texts that were older than the manuscripts used by the KJV translators.

Ancient Christian documents have also been found that have thrown light on early Christian thinking and practices, as well as their language (e.g. the Codex Hierosolymitanus which contains some of the works known as "the Apostolic Fathers" was found in 1873. These works originally date from the late first century to the mid second century.)

[7] Daniel Wallace, "The Conspiracy Behind New Bible Translations" at bible.org

[8] Erasmus was a Roman Catholic priest. He dedicated the first edition of his Greek New Testament to the Pope. (I include this bit of information for those who wrongly accuse the new translations as being unduly influenced by Roman Catholicism. See also endnote 11.)

[9] Robert Estienne, also known as Stephanas, based his text on the work of Erasmus but also used a text taken from the Codex Bezae. Theodore Beza primarily based his text on the Greek New Testament of Stephanus, but he may well have also used the Codex Bezae (which was given to him and bears his name. This book is also known as Codex Cantabrigensis as Beza later presented it to the University of Cambridge.) "Several scholars have observed the apparent anti-feminist tendencies of the writer of the Codex Bezae. The reviser represents the western tradition dating back to the second century, and clearly reveals the trend of thought among his contemporaries by rephrasing the received text of Acts 17:12 to read: 'and many of the Greeks and men and women of high standing believed.' The smoother reading serves to lessen any importance given women in Luke's account of the conversion at Berea, and proves to be a typical alteration of Bezae in Acts." Lesly Massey, "Women and the New Testament: An Analysis of Scripture in the Light of New Testament Era Culture" (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1989) p. 46-47.

[10] James R. White, "Is your Modern translation Corrupt? Answering the Allegations of KJV Only Advocates" p.2. ([Source](#))

[11] The 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland text was edited by eminent scholars [Barbara Aland](#) (Protestant), Kurt Aland (Protestant), Ioannes Karavidopoulos (Greek Othodox), Carlo Martini (Roman Catholic), and Bruce Metzger (Protestant).

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