How We Got the Bible

Lesson 6 – The King James Version

The Previous lesson covered who the translators were, what they believed, and the preface to the King James Version. In this lesson, we’re going to discuss the translation of the King James Version itself: 1) It’s blessing and beauty, 2) It’s vulgarity (vernacular/commonality) in 1611 and the concept of “false friends,” and finally 3) we’ll respond to modern-day false claims about the King James Version.

First, praise God for the King James Version of the Bible!

We’re talking about a translation of the Bible that God has used to save many, many souls by their reception of its truth by God-granted faith. The fact that it is still used today in so many English-speaking churches says something about the quality of work that was done in 1611 and in the following revisions. More than 400 years!

The King James translators did intend for the Bible to be beautiful, as it should be. The Bible was in a sense beautiful in Hebrew and Greek, so it only makes sense that the Bible should be beautiful in English. There is something to be said about the “force” of “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not” rather than “Do/Do not/You will/You will not.” Elizabethan English (many English speakers have this opinion, anyway) is very beautiful. Some of you read Shakespeare in high school though and said, “Um, ENGLISH, PLEASE!” But it’s important to remind ourselves, the Shakespearean English used in the King James was, ***for the most part***, not “fancy English” in King James’ day. It was generally normal English. That is how people talked. Koine Greek and Ancient Hebrew, however, are not “artsy/flowery” in their delivery. There are no “thee’s, thou’s, and eth’s” equivalents in the Greek and Hebrew texts.

It was the goal of the King James translators to produce a ***vulgar*** translation. I’ve chosen that word on purpose. That makes it sound like they wanted to produce something with a lot of inappropriate stuff and cuss words, doesn’t it?

But this is the point—vulgar *used to mean* “common.” Today, *vulgar* usually means something distasteful or inappropriate. Maybe the best word for Elizabethan *vulgarity* today is “*vernacular*.” Maybe that’s another hard word that people don’t use a lot, but that is also part the point. Making a “common” translation doesn’t mean that it must be a “trite/goofy/simplistic/sub-cultural i.e. – redneck or hipster” translation. A *vulgar*, that is, *vernacular* translation would mean that we use the most normal word generally used for a given meaning.

The King James was written in the vernacular of its day. So that brings us to the question – Is the King James still in the vernacular? Does it use the words that we commonly use today?

1 Corinthians 14 teaches us that when we speak especially in church, the words that we say should be understandable. There are concepts that will be difficult to explain. But the words we use should not be a distraction away from people being able to understand what we’re saying, and much greater, what the Bible says.

Let’s take a quiz, but first some clarifiers: This is not a quiz to try to make anyone feel dumb. First, I had to look up all but a select few of these words, so if you know some of these, you’ve surpassed my grasp of the English language. Second, I’ve intentionally not given you references. For many of us, if we had the context of a verse, sometimes we would be able to figure out what the word is probably saying. This is only to demonstrate that there are some words in the King James that have more normal modern-day words or expressions that could be used. The reason that this will be a hard quiz for the average English speaker is because these words are, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, *archaic*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Next, False friends:

**Suffer** - allow (Suffer the little children) Matt. 19:14

**Halt** - helter-skelter back and forth! (How long halt you between these two things?) 1 Kings 18:21

**Let** - to restrain (not “to allow!”) 2 Thessalonians 2:7

**Commendeth** - Not “Oh let me commend that to you,” but an actual beautiful demonstration of his love. Romans 5:8

**Convenient** - In the modern sense this means something that’s accessible – “I’ll get milk at the gas station because it’s more convenient.” In many ways it is convenient to use filthy talking as in Ephesians 5 – the meaning here is “suitable/fitting”

**Wait on ministering** – should we wait and consider whether or not we should minister before we minister? Romans 12:7 – Actually the meaning of this verse is the exact opposite of what it sounds like in modern English. If you have the gift of ministry, get busy ministering!

**Apt to teach** – Does “apt” mean “aptitude?” “I’m inclined to do X activity…” “Cats with claws are apt to scratch up the furniture.” They’re probably going to do X. Actually, apt here means *skillful* in teaching – not that there’s an inclination or a desire. 1 Timothy 3:2

**Quit you like men** – (See Mark Ward’s YouTube channel) The “man” part is good. But we don’t use “quit” like this anymore. 1 Cor. 16:13

**Book Recommendation: *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible -***Mark Ward; In addition, Mark Ward has some videos on YouTube that are worth your time and viewing on this subject.

**1 Corinthians 14:9**, “So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air.”

Language has changed . . . and sometimes that is in fact a result of cultural decay. But, how far do we take this idea of, “Go look it up in the dictionary!” before we make the same mistake as the Catholics of the Latin Vulgate? Latin was viewed as reverent, respectable speech. Developing English was viewed as that of those uneducated and of lowly estate, dare we make God’s Word sound uneducated?

There’s a practical problem with this: You can’t look up certain words in the dictionary that are in the KJV unless you’re willing to spend a lot of money.

Oxford English Dictionary – there’s the 20-volume set for $1200 (I kid you not!). There are words in the King James that you will not find in Websters, and many words that you will find but will not contain the archaic senses of the 1600’s. You have to purchase the BIG Oxford English Dictionary, not a concise edition. This dictionary online will cost you a subscription of $100 a year! You can probably find an older edition for 50 to 100 dollars.

There are also many blogs and sites online where you can find the proper meanings, but then you are at the mercy of the internet. Maybe you are looking at a reputable source, but maybe not. I could google many of these phrases and people online have written helpful things. That’s good!

But we repeat the question—If there is a perfectly good modern word, why force readers to learn an obsolete word? Archaic English words have no special connection to the original languages and themselves were a translation into what *used to be vernacular* of English to begin with. The KJV translators, to the disdain of the Catholic church, intended to make the Bible accessible to commoners. There are not good reasons to make ourselves jump through so many hoops.

**Illustration** – Let’s say you hire a translator to help you with your trip to China. You’re about to make a very significant business deal with a bank. The banker chatters a question to you – the whole deal is riding on your answer to his question. You look at the translator. He looks at you. He hands you an *English-Chinese* dictionary, “These are the characters of the phrase the banker said. Look it up.” You reply, “But, you’re my translator, you’re supposed to tell me what that means.” Your translator laughs, “Hahaha, You silly uneducated American. You so silly. Let me put another way for you, my small-minded friend. I give you English sentence. The banker say, ‘That which gaineth in thine account wanteth comely funds. It doth seem that thine wealth hath not been let, peradventure thou canst not commend that thou art apt as thou hast worked with thine own hands. Verily, this banker doth halt his opinion of this bruit, and enjoineth thee, lest thou be discomfited.”

You say, “Wong, that makes no sense.” Wong replies, “Then you look up in English dictionary, you silly American!”

Perhaps a better *translation* would be, “This banker says you don’t have enough money in your account. You should have practiced more restraint in your spending. It could be that you can’t demonstrate skillfulness in your current job situation. Because this is news to him, he’s now going back and forth on what to do, and he’s warning you to be more careful before he kicks you out of his office.”

Sufficient for meaning but probably too casual for this serious situation would be, “Kid, you’re upstream and without a paddle. You’ve been living like money grows on trees. You shoulda been more up-front about blowing all that cash. You’re a real head-scratcher now. Watch yo back, dawg...”

While we could look up difficult words in a dictionary, a translation is probably in need of examination and evaluation if we need to look up a word *where there is a word or phrase that would be* ***more normally*** *used*. One of the points of a translation is that you should not have to use a dictionary. There are Greek-English and Hebrew-English dictionaries, but I would argue it is better to use an English translation in an English-speaking church, rather than make folks look up every biblical word in lexicons (Hebrew and Greek dictionaries). In the same way, it was better to use the Koine (common) Greek Septuagint translation in first century churches across the known world.

**Responding to *extremist* KJVO-arguments** (People who prefer to use the King James do not necessarily hold to these positions. Don’t throw away your King James Version!):

1. The English corrects the Greek/ You can only be saved out of the KJV.

This is what the Catholic church said about the Latin Vulgate. “Truer than the vulgar Greek text!” Why start at the KJV instead of the Geneva or Bishop’s Bible? What about a bilingual kid in Arizona who has a Spanish Bible and a King James, which Bible should he get saved out of? What Bible did people get saved out of prior to 1611, and is it the 1611 KJV, or one of the multiple revisions until 1769 that people can be saved out of?

To be very clear, this argument is saying that the Koine Greek original manuscripts are corrupt. This is nonsense. It is also heresy because it says the gospel is Jesus Christ + the King James Version.

1. Psalm 12:6-7 “Purified 7 times”

Psalm 12:6-7 has been used to say that the King James Version is the correct English Bible because it underwent 7 purifications.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Tyndale Bible (1526)
2. Coverdale Bible (1535)
3. Matthew Bible (1537)
4. Great Bible (1539)
5. Geneva Bible (1560)
6. Bishop’s Bible (1568)
7. King James Bible (1611)

This too, is nonsense. Psalm 12 would have first been in reference to the Hebrew Bible, and we have no such proof of 7 revisions of the Hebrew text, nor for any other translation in any language ancient or modern. Further, this means that all modern Bible translations for unreached people groups are destined for failure until their 7th revision. The work of our supported missionary who works in Bible translation, Glenn Kerr, will be fruitless until he does each of his jobs 7 times.

This is not what Psalm 12:6-7 is teaching. God’s Word was ***perfect*** the very second he spoke it. “Purified 7 times” is a poetic Hebrew parallelism to the “pure words” mentioned earlier in the verse. It is restating the truth that God’s Word is trustworthy. Think of when Jesus said to forgive your neighbor’s offenses “70 times 7.” The cut-off is not 490. This was an expression, just like we have expressions that are not taken literally in the English language. Psalm 12 teaches that God’s Word is trustworthy even though wicked people temporarily prosper. It does not teach that in the future, one English Bible translation would be superior to all others after its 7th revision. Even if that were the case, it would be unclear which KJV to select because of the various typographical errors and revisions to the 1611 KJV.

1. Those other translations take God’s name out of the Bible.

Remember the “God forbid” discussion from previous lessons. There are multiple instances where the KJV uses God’s name that are not in any Hebrew, Greek, or even Latin manuscripts.

1. Other translations add and take away from the Bible.

Notice the adding and taking away language both of Matthew 5:18 and in revelation. Both are focused on accompanying *actions* and *obedience* to what is written. If we are not allowed to add or change words, jots and tittles, then translation is sinful. This means the Septuagint (LXX) would also have been sinful and Jesus and the apostles should have never used it, and Jesus’ quotations of the OT in the NT of the KJV itself are corrupt.

In Matthew 5:18, God’s Word would be added to if someone made extra obedience requirements or took away some aspect of faith and obedience to Christ that God requires. Notice the breaking of commandments in 5:19.

In Revelation 22:18 there is a warning not to add or take away from words. But what is the command we are not to add and take away from? Obedience to Christ. Partaking of the water of life *freely* v. 17 – some add to that and say that yes you must come to Christ but to be saved “YOU MUST ALSO \_\_\_\_.” Anything added to the gospel will result in damnation. The clarifier again in v. 20—Jesus says He’s coming quickly. Some people take that away and say He’s not coming, and that the resurrection is already past (1 Cor. 15). Some add to that and try to predict the date, but no one knows the hour! Believe in Christ. Follow Him. Don’t add or take away from the commandments He has given us *to follow.*

If a translation were to lead someone ***to not follow the commandments*** of Christ, or if it were to lead someone ***to add to the gospel***of Christ, it would be a corrupt translation. There are multiple good English translations (not all are good!); we’ll discuss these in the next lesson.

Key Takeaways

1. The King James Version is a beautiful and trustworthy translation that accurately reflected the truth found in the original languages especially to 1611 English speakers, and it was translated in such a way that the average blue-collar worker would have been able to read it without ever using a dictionary.
2. The King James is not *utterly* obsolete. It is beautiful, it is valuable to study history and it is a fruitful process to study the history of words. We should not consider study of the King James Bible obsolete, nor the Geneva Bible, the Tyndale Bible, the Latin Vulgate, the LXX, nor the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. All of what we have points to the historical reality that God has preserved His truth for us.

God chose to preserve His Word in such a way that we are to be ***diligent and study*** the wealth of that which has been given to us. It doesn’t come by osmosis or “having the right one” on the shelf. Faith comes by *hearing*, and it’s not actually hearing if there is no understanding. Praise God that we have the privilege in our day and age to start with good translations in the language we speak! (This has not always been the case for every generation, but ***God’s truth has endured to every generation***!)

1. There are translations that add to the gospel of Christ. Example: the Jehovah’s witnesses New World Translation (NWT) *intentionally* removes language that clearly shows the deity of Christ.
2. Many modern English translations have been falsely accused of adding/taking away from God’s truth. If “every word” or “every jot and tittle” meant that words must match 100%, then translation is sinful, and it is unclear where to start in the search for a trustworthy Bible. But if these verses mean that God promises to preserve meaning for us and has given us what we need for life and godliness, then we can joyfully study the wealth of what has been preserved for us.
3. ***Read, understand, and obey your Bible!***
1. An archaic word means, according to the OED, “very old and no longer used.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://carm.org/king-james-onlyism/psalm-126-and-king-james-onlyism/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)