

Thoughts on English Bible Versions, with Special Reference to the King James Version

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This document is a compilation of materials composed between 1997 and 2000 in response to church members' questions regarding English Bible versions. The context of their inquiries was twofold:

- membership in an independent Baptist church that privileged the use of the King James Version (KJV)
- exposure to a variety of views on the nature of that privilege, including the notion that the KJV is in a unique sense God's Word preserved in the English language

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Key Issues in the English Bible Version Debate

- **Text:** The best version will be based on the most reliable manuscripts.
- **Technique:** The best version will achieve the proper balance between literal and dynamic equivalency.
- **Tradition:** The best version will honor the best traditions of the English Bible, but will break with such tradition when necessary.
- **Translators:** The best version will reflect both spirituality and scholarship on the part of its creators.

The KJV as a Standard English Version

The benefits of a standard version

- It facilitates corporate reading.
- It facilitates memorization.
- It reduces confusion among readers.
- It makes sense of the circumstances (100+ versions of the English New Testament).

The strengths of the KJV as a standard version

- Its translation technique is fairly literal rather than paraphrastic.
- Its textual base is the Received Text. Whether or not this is the best text—and few have the knowledge to argue one way or another—it is less confusing to keep this text than to use a different one.
- Its tradition is rich, both in terms of its literary quality and its church use.

The future of the KJV as a standard version

- Standards are necessary in organizations in order to ensure uniformity. Yet the choice of a Bible version is a locally-determined decision. Principles of soul liberty and local church autonomy—both core Baptist beliefs—must be honored here. At its heart, the version debate is not a theological issue, but a philosophical one.
- Language changes over time. The spirit of both the New Testament and the Reformation was “the Scriptures in the language of the people.” At some point it is inevitable that the KJV will lose its usefulness to the common English speaker. People may disagree on whether that time is yet future, is now present, or has already come.
- Many versions are spiritually useful, both for evangelism and edification.
- Thousands of languages and dialects do not have a translation of any portion of the Scriptures. Therefore, should we focus on the issue of which English version to use or on the priority of translating the Scriptures into those languages?

Assessing the Contemporary Worth of the KJV

The King James Version of the Bible, first produced in 1611, is a literary masterpiece. It borrowed heavily from previous translations, most heavily from William Tyndale’s work. It was an excellent translation for its time. God has used it to bring millions to Christ and nurture their faith in Him. It justly remains one of the most popular Bible translations on the market today. It exhibits good features of a literal translation, being straightforward in meaning yet employing some artistry of language.

The KJV was revised several times through 1769. However, to my knowledge, it did not undergo revision from 1769 until 1881, when the British Revised Version (RV) appeared. The American Standard Version (ASV) was published in 1901. Each of these versions attempted to update the KJV for a specific audience.

Some important things have happened in the four centuries since the KJV was originally produced. First, nearly all facets of the English language have undergone significant evolution. To some extent, the KJV and other durable writings have served to limit this change, but it has occurred nevertheless. Second, thousands of biblical manuscripts have been discovered, primarily in the twentieth century. These have provided further evidence for the original text of the Scriptures.

How have these two developments affected the continued usefulness of the KJV? As far as the language issue is concerned, there can be little doubt that the KJV is archaic to some extent. There are definitely terms that require explanation and definition. Other versions do a better job of using terms that are more commonly understood by the average twenty-first century reader.

The issue of the KJV’s textual base is much more complex. There are now in excess of 5,000 Greek manuscripts containing at least a portion of the New Testament (NT). Given that these manuscripts were copied repeatedly over the course of hundreds of years, it comes as little surprise to discover that there are some differences between them. These differences are called variants. What is significant about the variants is that they are relatively few: Despite their presence, the NT remains the most accurately attested document of antiquity. Roughly 1-2 percent of the NT text is affected by variants.

There are 2 or 3 basic schools of thought concerning textual criticism (the branch of study that deals with ascertaining the original text of Scripture). The first is that of the NA/UBS. This acronym refers to two text compilers (Nestle and Aland) and the United Bible Societies. It is often referred to as the “critical text.” Representatives of this method see it as their responsibility to judge among the variant readings and determine on various criteria which is most likely to be the original.

The second view of textual criticism is the one that favors the “majority text” (MT). In other words, wherever there are variants, majority text proponents favor whichever reading is most commonly attested by the available manuscripts. MT readers express their faith in God’s preservation of his Word in the most common reading. This method may sound a bit simplistic, but it is more objective than the critical text approach, which is subject to the opinion of the critic.

In most portions of the NT the KJV is fairly consistent with the MT. However, many King-James-Only proponents tend to reject both the critical and majority texts in favor of the “Textus Receptus” (i.e., the received text, or TR). This is the third option in textual matters. The TR is not a single text, but merely refers to a compilation of the fairly small number of manuscripts available to the KJV translators. Because the TR and MT are relatively similar (as opposed to the critical text), they are sometimes regarded to be in the same camp.

To my knowledge, there is currently no available translation of the MT. The KJV and its successor, the New King James Version (NKJV), are based on the TR, though the NKJV lists variant readings in its marginal notes. As far as I know, all other contemporary versions are based on the critical text.

So what does this all mean for the average Bible reader? Differences in textual base, translation technique and purpose, and linguistic style all impact the final form of a Bible version. I personally use several on a regular basis. I use the NKJV for my basic reading. I do additional reading in the KJV when I am preparing to teach an audience that favors the KJV. I also refer to the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and New International Version (NIV) some. In addition, I own copies of several other versions, though I use them less.¹

Here are some quick assessments of the most popular versions:

- KJV—a fairly literal translation of the TR, artistic in language, though archaic because of passage of time

¹ In the years that have transpired between composition of the sources on which this document is based, and their subsequent compilation into a single document, I have made extensive use of two additional versions: the NET Bible and the English Standard Version (ESV). After reading from the NET Bible for several years, I cannot say that I favor its use in public ministry, although I find it useful for study purposes—not only for its many footnotes, but occasionally for its rendering of the text. I have used the ESV in my personal study for the last two years and have been quite impressed with its balance and consistency.

- NKJV—similar to the KJV, though in more updated language and containing references to textual variants
- NASB—a highly literal translation of the critical text, though somewhat less beautiful as a literary text because of its technical rigidity
- NIV—a very readable translation based on the critical text, though sometimes a little loose in its rendering of the original language

Because of the high degree of consistency among the original manuscripts and the English versions themselves, I believe that a Christian can read profitably from any of the above versions (and several others). It is difficult to neutralize the power of the Word of God through translation unless one sets out to produce a version that denies a particular biblical doctrine. Each version has its own particular weaknesses, but by and large the four I have listed above are quite reliable.

Why, then, all the controversy among certain Christians? First, there is fear of theological decay. The biblical text is obviously the source for our theology. If it changes, so do the doctrines that are “downstream” from it. Second, there is a lack of understanding of the relationship of the English versions to the original manuscripts (hence the discussion above). Third, there is a natural resistance to change that is heightened by certain “accidents” of history.

The first “accident” is the fact that there was not a major revision effort between 1769 and 1881. Neither the RV (1881) nor the ASV (1901) became universally accepted like the KJV. So there has not been an accepted people’s version for a long time. The second “accident” was the proliferation of versions in the last thirty or so years of the twentieth century. Looking at things historically, the present version confusion might have been avoided if a regular revision process had been undertaken to account for language changes and textual discoveries. Had that happened, we might not have more than 100 NT version choices today.² As things stand now, I do not see any hope of a resolution.

I think it is entirely appropriate for local churches to have some kind of policy concerning the use of Bible versions. For example, they might mandate that a specific version is to be used as the primary text for preaching and teaching. This would not prevent members from reading other versions in the pew or at home. It would not necessarily preclude some from teaching from a non-standard version when in small groups or Sunday School classes. In addition, it would not prevent quoting or displaying other versions in the pulpit.

² Over time I have become more conscious of an additional factor influencing the proliferation of English versions: the nature of Bible sales as a cash cow for Christian publishers.