

Is the KJV Really the Most Accurate Translation?

By David Ervin

The KJV is a great translation of the original text of the Bible! I grew up on it. I love it. I still read it today—it is a great translation. But it is in the final analysis—a translation. Anytime concepts are translated from one language to another (and from one culture to another) there will be losses. We believe that the Bible is word for word inspired by God and infallible *in the original languages*. In the original Hebrew and Greek text, every word is exactly as it should be. But a translation of the original text of the Bible, whether into English, French or Spanish, is not infallible. The men who translate Scripture (though certainly aided by the Holy Spirit in their task) are not infallible and neither are their translations. Even the KJV had many errors when it was first printed and went through many revisions and corrections. One 1611 printing contained “and he went into the city” in Ruth 3:15 while another 1611 had “and she went into the city.” Another 1611 printing had “Judas” for “Jesus” in Mat. 26:36. Even after the “bugs” were worked out, the KJV continued to change and be revised all the way up to the present day. If you picked up a KJV that was actually printed in 1611 and compared it to a modern KJV, there would be differences. There have been changes made in the wording of KJV in the following years: 1613, 1616, 1617, 1618, 1629, 1630, 1633, 1634, 1637, 1638, 1640, 1642, 1653, 1659, 1675, 1679, 1833, 1896, 1904. More than 100,000 changes have been made to the KJV since 1611.

Why all these changes and why the need for new translations today? For the very same reason that the KJV (and all other English translations were made in the first place) because language changes. Remember that the KJV, and the English translations that proceeded it, came about because for centuries the church of Rome restricted the Scriptures to Latin alone (a language that the common man could not read or understand). It was illegal to translate the Bible into English and men like Tyndale and others gave their lives to bring the Scriptures out of an archaic language into a form that the boy behind the plow could understand. All of our English translations today are based upon that principle. We must take care not to fall into the same error as Rome did then. The Bible was originally written in the language of the common man and so a translation must do the same. English words that mean one thing to one generation mean nothing to another. The original message of the Bible does not change but our English language does. And so new translations become necessary to make the Word of God accessible to new generations. God the Holy Spirit has preserved His Word through the centuries by bringing new translations into every culture and tribe.

Every translation of the Bible must make choices. A translator has several options available when deciding how to best convey the meaning a particular text to the target audience. Many people who have not studied a foreign language believe that to translate, one must simply substitute each word for its equivalent in the target language. But it is not that simple. The very structure of sentences and thoughts are different from one language to another. Anyone who is conversant in more than one language recognizes that a word-for-word translation is simply not possible if one is going to communicate in an understandable way (The KJV itself is not a word-for word translation). A translation must take into account culture idioms and figures of speech that are unique to each culture. Take this passage in 1 Samuel 24:3 for example:

The KJV reads:

“And he came to the sheepcotes by the way, where *was* a cave;
and Saul went in to cover his feet”

Do you know what Saul was doing in the cave? Why was Saul “covering his feet?” As a modern reader does this make sense to you?

Now read the same passage in the ESV:

“And he came to the sheepfolds by the way, where there was a cave,
and Saul went in to relieve himself.”

Now we understand what Saul was doing in the cave! The term “cover his feet” is a euphemism for going to the toilet. The ESV translator made a choice. Do I use a cultural euphemism that the modern reader will not understand or do I substitute it with a modern equivalent euphemism “relieve himself” so that the message will be understood? There is no right or wrong answer to this question. This of course is a trivial matter that Saul had to tinkle. But the point is that the work of translation is not as simple as one might first think and choices have to be made. A good translation is one in which the reader *can actually understand* what the Bible is saying.

Here are some KJV words that made absolute sense to a 1611 reader, but (without peaking ahead) what do they mean to you?

“And I thought to advertise thee, saying, Buy *it* before the inhabitants, and before the elders of my people.” (Ruth 4:4 KJV)

What is meant by the word “advertise?” What did the original writer intend to say?

“So I thought to inform you, saying, ‘Buy *it* before those who are sitting *here*, and before the elders of my people.’” (Ruth 4:4 NASB)

The original word meant *to tell someone* or *inform them*.

“Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation *aright* will I shew the salvation of God.” (Psalm 50:23 KJV)

What does the word “conversation” mean? Do you think it is talking about what we say? That we must be holy with the words that come out of our mouth?

The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!” (Psalm 50:23 ESV)

The original is not talking about *what you say* but about *behavior*. A 1611 reader would have understood it that way because in the language of that day “conversation” meant “behavior.” But could you honestly have understood that from the KJV wording?

And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water (Matthew 3:16 KJV)

What does the word "straightway" mean? I heard a man tell me once that this proves baptism is by full immersion because it says that Jesus went "up straight" out of the water!

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water (Matthew 3:16 ESV)

A 1611 reader would have known that straightway means "immediately."

And it came to pass, that he went through the corn fields on the Sabbath day; and his disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of corn. (Matthew 2:23 KJV)

Is Jesus and the disciples walking through head-high, green stalks of corn? Are the disciples plucking ears of yellow corn on the cob? Is that what they are eating?

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. (Matthew 2:23 NIV)

No. They are walking through either a wheat or barley field rubbing the grain heads between their hands. Yellow corn on the cob (such as we know it) was brought to the old world by Columbus after he discovered it in America being

grown by the native American Indians. Yellow Corn (that grows on a cob) did not exist in Israel in Bible times. So why does the KJV translate "grain" as "corn". Because in 1611, all grain was called "corn." That is why Jesus says in the KJV of John 12:24 "except a corn of wheat fall to the ground." In the 17th century, wheat was called "wheat corn" and barely was called "barely corn." So when Columbus brought back this strange new, yellow stuff that grows on a cob they called it, "Indian Corn." Eventually the "Indian" part got dropped off so that today we just call it "corn." The KJV translation made perfect sense to a person living in 1611 and adequately translated the original into the English of the day. But did you understand it? Did the true story of Jesus walking through a grain field get passed on to your modern ears or something else?

The Bible was originally written in the language of the common man. A translation's job is to convey the original meaning of the text into the language that is in common use. The KJV did a great job of that for the people of its day. But the English language has so changed in 400 years that much of the KJV vocabulary is now just as strange and foreign as the Greek it is attempting to translate! Jesus didn't speak in strange Victorian English that people strained to understand. He spoke in fresh, common words that ordinary people used every day. The translation we read should speak as He did.

Another issue when it comes to the accuracy of a translation is the source material used. We do not have the original writings of the Bible. What we have are ancient copies—lots of them. We call them “manuscripts.” Some manuscripts are better than others. What makes a manuscript better?

Firstly its age: The older a manuscript is, the closer it is to the original and thus the more likely it is to convey the original text.

Its Quality: Some manuscripts are more complete than others. Some are filled with typos and scribal additions and corrections.

Translators also take into account the number of manuscripts that authenticate a text. If 500 manuscripts do not include a word but 1 manuscript does, the evidence suggests that the word was not in the original but added later by a Scribe. Manuscripts are constantly being discovered. We now have higher quality manuscripts that are more than a 1000 years older than anything that was available to the translators of the KJV. In fact, in the last six verses of Revelation, Erasmus (the final editor of the KJV) had no Greek manuscript at all! He translated from a Latin manuscript guessing at what the original Greek might have been. In so doing he created 17 variants (changes) that are not found in any Greek manuscript anywhere!

Far from being perfect there are well known translation errors in the KJV. For example, in Matthew 23.24 the KJV says, “Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.” The Greek means “strain out a gnat.” They used to strain gnats out of the wine with a cheese cloth.

Many Christians complain that the modern translations have removed words and verses from the Bible. But it is more accurate to say that the KJV *added* words and verses to the Bible that were never there in the original to begin with. The modern version is not removing anything, so much as it is being true to the original text. Others worry that essential doctrines are compromised in modern English versions. But no major doctrine of Christianity is changed in any of these translations.

Questions for the KJV only person to consider:

“I think the KJV is the most accurate.” How do you know that? How exactly did you come to that conclusion? Have you read other translations in their entirety and compared them? Do you know the original languages? Have you consulted manuscripts? Is your conclusion based more on perception than actual facts?

“New Translations change important doctrines.” How do you know that? Can you site actual examples of this? Is your conclusion based more on perception than actual facts?

As I said in the beginning, the KJV is a great translation! I am writing these things not to persuade anyone against it but only to show, that there are other translations that are great too, and worthy to be called the Word of God. We must understand translations as just that—a translation. Not one of them is perfect but yet by God the Holy Spirit’s preservation we have at our disposal, many faithful translations of His infallible word into English. An unbeliever asked me once, “which Bible is the correct translation?” I responded, “the one you will actually read and understand.”