

1611



Straight From Heaven?

Some believe that the King James Bible is the only Bible you should ever read. Are they correct?

by Greg Hartman

Would it upset you if I took a large marker pen and crossed out hundreds of portions of your Bible? I hope you would fume with rage. Well, take a look the New American Standard Bible.... There are literally hundreds of portions of Scripture the translators have left out. You'd probably be better off with the Jehovah's Witnesses' translation. Apparently, they have taken out a lot less than the New American Standard Bible.¹

It sounds a bit dramatic to insist that a person or persons of evil intent removed hundreds of passages from modern translations—and that only a circumspect few noticed. Yet this is one of the mildest accusations against modern-language Bibles made by those who believe the King James Version (KJV) is the only Bible English-speaking Christians should use.

Let's leave the sillier accusations for the supermarket tabloids (see "Imprecatory Mutterings") and take a look at the issues involved.

The KJV's story is familiar to most Christians: In a move every bit as political as it was pious, King James I convened a series of meetings at Hampton Court in 1604 to discuss a new English Bible translation, the first to be

authorized by crown and church. In 1611, the 52 chosen translators finished their new Bible, christening it the King James Version.

Since then the KJV has undergone more than a dozen revisions, growing in popularity until it has become the best-selling book in history, bar none. Only recently has another Bible—the New International Version—edged it out in annual sales.

The KJV is also the center of a controversy that began about 50 years ago when new translations began flooding the market, and which has only increased in volume since. Critics of newer translations range from those who complain they're of poor quality to those who accuse translators of deliberately changing Scripture.

Most modern translators work from egalitarian texts—printed texts that "conflate" as many ancient manuscripts of the Bible as possible in order to identify and eliminate errors and corruption in the text.

The textual underpinning of the Old Testament in the KJV is much the same as for modern translations. Relatively few Hebrew manuscripts are of extremely high quality.



But the New Testament is a different matter. Textual critics have to deal with a staggering number of manuscripts in every degree of quality—nearly 25,000 altogether—divided into four major families: Alexandrian, Western, Caesarean and Byzantine. Each of these text families is named after the geographical region in which it was produced, and each has distinct characteristics.

Byzantine manuscripts, for instance, were produced over the widest span of history. Because of this, the Byzantine family is by far the largest and is sometimes called the Majority Text.

God's Preserved Word

KJV proponents tend to adhere to preservationist doctrine—saying that God's preserved word (Psalm 12:6-7) is the one most widely used by the church. Since the Byzantine text is the largest and the base of such important Bibles as the Luther Bible and the KJV, they reason, it alone is God's Word.

It's one thing to argue the merits and qualities of the text families. Some carry this argument much further though, finding egregious fault with the other text families and Bibles produced from them.

In July 2003, for instance, the Jesus Non-Denominational Church in Greenville, Michigan, held a book-burning, inviting parishioners to destroy copies of the *Harry Potter* series. They also, however, burned Catholic rosaries, Mormon literature and any Bible that wasn't a KJV. Like many other KJV-onlyists, they insisted that other translations are not only inferior, but also spiritually dangerous—despite disagreeing with the translators who produced the very Bible they cherish (see "A Word From the Translators").

A close look at the talking points in this debate though, reveals some-

thing interesting: The King James Version itself flunks the unfair litmus tests often applied to other Bible versions.

Talking Point No. 1: The KJV's Textual Base Is Superior

The Byzantine text family is largest for a simple reason: Byzantium was overrun by Islam in 1453, almost 800 years after the other three text centers—meaning that for almost 800 years, only Byzantium was producing manuscripts. Egalitarian translators point out that the Majority Text was, therefore, no such thing until the 7th century. They also point out that if preservationist doctrine is true, three-fourths of the ancient world never had the Word of God.

But the best point *vis a vis* the KJV is this: No one ever assembled and published a Majority Text until 1982. Indeed, the KJV is not based on the Majority Text at all (the New King James Version is, though).

In 1515, a Swiss printer heard of the *Complutensian Polyglot*, a printed Greek text still in production, and decided to beat it into print. He hired Desiderius Erasmus, who hastily assembled a Greek text from six very late Byzantine manuscripts in less than nine months. One of the manuscripts was so corrupted Erasmus was forced to resort to the Latin Vulgate to fill in the gaps. He was in such a hurry, in fact, that in places he actually wrote

King James I of England (above) presided over the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, held at Hampton Court Palace (below), southwest of London. The outcome of this conference was a new Bible translation project. The 52 translators presented their completed work to King James in 1611 (right).



corrections right on the manuscripts and sent them to the printer. The printing itself was no better, containing thousands of errors.

Erasmus' text sold well, however, despite dozens of revisions and thousands of corrections over the next 200 years. Erasmus' text was dubbed *Textus Receptus*, or Received Text, in 1633, by which time it had been modified so much it was almost a text family of its own.

Despite this, the translators of the KJV used Erasmus' text to produce a Bible that has retained its popularity for almost 400 years. Nevertheless, the poor quality of Erasmus' work introduced errors into the KJV, which have been corrected in later translations (see Talking Point No. 3).

All translators, including the KJV's, struggle to identify the highest-quality texts. As the translators of the New King James Version point out in their preface, however,

the actual differences between text families are so small they're effectively meaningless, meaning we can place our confidence in *any* of them.

Talking Point No. 2: The KJV Is the Most Literal

Terms such as "literal" and "paraphrase" are useless to translators. Instead, they make choices along a wide spectrum between *formal equivalence* and *dynamic equivalence*.

Greek and Hebrew are so different from English in grammar, syntax and idiom that a pure rendition into English is nearly impossible. Here, for instance, is John 3:16 rendered with word-by-word formal equivalence:

*Thus for he-loved the God the world that the son the only-born he-gave that every the believing into him not he-might-perish but he-might-have life eternal.*²

A "translation" like this would be useless to anyone who didn't



FROM AN ILLUSTRATION BY ALBRECHT DURER

Desiderius Erasmus, whose hastily-assembled and error-filled Greek New Testament text was used to produce the King James Version.

already know Greek! Like every other Bible, the KJV has to search behind idiom, weights, measures and so on to present the meaning *behind* these ancient obstacles to the modern reader:

- The Greek *lepta* is replaced with *mite* (an English coin) in Luke

Is Older Really Better?

A common misconception about the KJV is that it's the first—and thus the best—English Bible. But the KJV is not the first translation into the English language.

An English monk named Caedmon wrote poetry on biblical themes around A.D. 650, but the great English historian Bede (c. 672-735) prepared the earliest known written English translation of any part of the Bible—the Gospel of John. No copies have survived. Other early translations include the Book of Psalms by Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherborne (640-709); the Ten Commandments and other parts of Exodus 21-23 by Alfred the Great (849-899), king of the West Saxons; the Lindisfarne Gospels by Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne (d. 687).

Here is an early translation of The Lord's Prayer:

*Foeder ure, thu the eart on heofonum,
si thin nama gehalgod. Tobecume thin rice
Gewurpe jin willa on eorjan
Swa swa on heofonum.*

Urne gedoeghwamlican hlaf syle us to doey

*And forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa we forgyfaj urum gyl-
tendum*

And ne geloe the us on rostnunge,

As alys us of yfele.

Sothlice

Can you read that? Neither can I; in fact, only a few scholars can read Old English.

Some 700 years later, 250 years before the KJV, John Wycliffe (1320-1384) translated the entire Bible into Middle

English. Here's the Parable of the Wheat and Tares according to Wycliffe:

The kyngdom of heuenes if maad lijk to a man, that sewe good seed in his feld.

And whanne men slepten, his enemy

cam, and sewe aboute taris in the myddil of whete, and wente awai. But when the herbe was growed, and made fruyt, than the taris apperiden. And the seruauntis of the hosebonde man camen, and seiden to him, Lord, whether hast thou not sowun good seed in thi feeld? And he seide to hem, An enemy hath do this thing. And the seruauntis seiden to him, Wolt thou that we goon, and gaderen hem? And he seide, Nay, lest perauenture ge in gaderynge taris drawn vp with hem the whete bi the roote. Suffre ge hem bothe to sexe in to repying tyme; and in the tyme of ripe corn Y shall seie to the reperis, First gadere ge to gidere the taris, and bynde hem to gidere in knytechis to be brent, but gadere ge whete in to my berne.

English is a living language, not a fixed or scholarly language. If the Lord tarries long enough, in another few hundred years the early modern English of the KJV will be as incomprehensible to the average reader as these early English translations are to us today.



A copy of the Wycliffe Bible, circa 1420

PTM PHOTO

It is not the work
of the translators
that makes a Bible
so important; it is
the God who
inspired his Word
in the first place.

21:2: The KJV translators knew their readers wouldn't know a lepta from a drachma from a denarius. In Matthew 5:26, "kodrantēs" is replaced with "farthing" for the same reason.

- Matthew 23:6 says "they love the first couch at the suppers" in Greek—a phrase meaningless in Renaissance England, so the translators replaced it with "they love the uppermost rooms at the feast."

- Paul's famous "God forbid!" in the KJV (Romans 3:4,6,31; 6:2,15, etc.) is the Greek *me genoito*—literally, "May it never be." This was a strong epithet in Paul's day, so the KJV translators chose words that would have a similar impact on their readers (in other words, the

KJV does what its proponents complain about other Bibles doing—it takes liberties with God's name!).

These and many other instances demonstrate that the KJV translators set themselves the same task as today's translators: To bring the message of Scripture out from behind the veil of language and idiom in a way their readers could grasp.

Talking Point No. 3: The KJV Is Most Accurate

Critics point out revisions, updates and corrections to modern-language Bibles and wonder how they can be the Word of God when they contain errors. The same question can fairly be asked of the King James Version.

The earliest editions of the KJV included the Apocrypha, for instance. Many of the translators protested, but others threatened to walk out if it wasn't included. Hampton Court being an ecumenical/political endeavor as much as a Bible committee, King James himself, rumor has it, stepped in and ordered the Court to include the Apocrypha. It was quietly removed in later revisions.

The KJV scholars enjoyed an excellent grasp of Greek, but struggled with poor manuscripts. Conversely,

they had excellent Old Testament manuscripts at their disposal, but a shaky knowledge of Hebrew. These two peculiarities led to some errors in the KJV:

- In 1 John 5:7-8, the KJV adds, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one"—a variant that can be traced to the third edition of Erasmus' text in 1522 and which did not appear in the Byzantine text until the 14th century.

- The KJV translates the Hebrew *re'em* as *unicorn* (Job 39:9-10; Psalm 29:6; 92:10). Most modern versions—including the New King James Version—say "wild ox." Translators now know the word probably refers to the *auerochs*, an extinct species of ox.

- The KJV also uses the artificial name Jehovah, a word that is actually impossible to spell in Hebrew. Translators accidentally invented it when they tried to transliterate the divine name, YHWH, into English with the vowel pointing for the name *Adonai*, which Hebrew scribes placed under YHWH to remind rabbis and readers not to say it out loud. The KJV translators reproduced the mistake—which also was corrected in the New King James Version.

The translators of the KJV believed, like today's translators, that only the originals, or autographs, of Scripture were perfect (see "A Word From the Translators"). Nevertheless, even an imperfect Bible is still the Word of God. Being the Word of God, it should not be discarded just because it is imperfect; since it is imperfect, there should be no fear of improvements or revisions.

What's the Point to All This Nitpicking?

I certainly don't intend to return tit for tat to those who find fault with modern-language translations—the KJV is a great Bible, but it's important to remember that it's no better or worse than any other Bible. It is not the work of the translators that makes a Bible so

Imprecatory Mutterings

Conspiracy theories abound about modern translations. Some are so lurid that they put one more in mind of "The X-Files" than the Bible:

- ❖ A lesbian helped translate the NIV.¹
- ❖ The New King James Version has an occult symbol that stands for the Mark of the Beast on its cover.
- ❖ The NIV removed 64,000 words from the Bible and no one noticed.
- ❖ Plagues have struck down entire committees who worked on modern versions.
- ❖ Rupert Murdoch owns Zondervan, publisher of the NIV, and he also owns other non-Christian publishers.
- ❖ Westcott and Hort, whose Greek text many modern translators use, may have been (gasp) Freemasons.
- ❖ The Codex Vaticanus, an important New Testament manuscript not discovered until 1841, is so named because it was stored at the Vatican (apparently this has something to do with whatever is evil about Catholicism in general).
- ❖ The letters in "New International Version" add up to 666.

¹ There's actually a grain of truth to this—but only a grain. Virginia Mollenkott consulted with the committee on contemporary English idiom and usage in the late 1960s, very early in the process. Years later her own writings made her homosexuality public knowledge. Dr. Kenneth Barker, executive director of the NIV Translation Center, publicly stated that the committee would not have consulted her had they known she was gay; nevertheless, as her contribution took place long before translation even began, it did not affect the translators. This is not good enough for the NIV's detractors—although none of them has shown any evidence or examples of corruption caused by Mollenkott.

A Word From the Translators

Those who adhere to Majority Text/preservationist doctrine might be surprised to find that the KJV translators themselves sound a great deal like those with whom they disagree. These statements are excerpted from the original preface to the King James Version.

What Many Modern Translators Believe

It is wise to add new translations to those we already have—not only in new languages, but also in updated, contemporary language.

God's Word is still God's Word, even in a badly rendered translation.

Only the Bible's authors enjoyed perfect transmission of God's Word. Therefore the King James Version, like any other work of man, is good, but flawed. If it is good, it should not be dismissed because it is not yet perfect; yet if it is flawed, there should be no fear of improvements.

Quibbling over words is foolish. If a translation's words become archaic, it should be discarded in favor of a fresh, contemporary translation.

What the KJV Translators Said

Many men's mouths have been open a good while [and yet are not stopped] with speeches about the Translation so long in hand, or rather perusals of Translations made before: and ask what may be the reason, what the necessity of the employment: Hath the Church been deceived, say they, all this while?
...Now what can be more available thereto, than to deliver God's book unto God's people in a tongue which they understand?

The very meanest translation of the Bible in English...containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God. As the King's speech, which he uttereth in Parliament, being translated into French, Dutch, Italian and Latin, is still the King's speech, though it be not interpreted by every Translator with the like grace, nor peradventure so fitly for phrase, nor so expressly for sense, everywhere.

No cause therefore why the Word translated should be denied to be the Word, or forbidden to be current, notwithstanding that some imperfections and blemishes may be noted in the setting forth of it.

For whatever was perfect under the sun, where Apostles or apostolic men, that is, men endued with an extraordinary measure of God's Spirit, and privileged with the privilege of infallibility, had not their hand?

...Whatsoever is sound already...the same will shine as gold more brightly, being rubbed and polished; also, if anything be halting, or superfluous, or not so agreeable to the original, tyhe same may be corrected, and the truth set in place.

Is the kingdom of God become words or syllables? Why should we be in bondage to them, if we may be free? use one precisely when we may use another no less fit as commodiously?

...If we should say, as it were, unto certain words, Stand up higher, have a place in the Bible always, and to others of like quality, Get ye hence, be banished for ever, we might be taxed peradventure with S. James's words, namely, To be partial in ourselves, and judges of evil thoughts.

important; it is the God who inspired his Word in the first place.

I've often been amused at the unconscious arrogance in many of these arguments: "My understanding of the Word would be flawless if these translators would just do their job right!"

As Edward Goodrick put it in his excellent book, *Is My Bible the Inspired Word of God?*, when God's Word flows into us, we ourselves introduce the most pollution into the pipeline—not the translators:

"The autographs are inspired with no pollution," Goodrick says, "the printed Greek and Hebrew texts are inspired with very little

pollution, the translation is inspired with very little pollution—and your interpretation of the Bible is inspired with *massive* pollution!"³ We do well to remember that we are the weakest link, not the translators, and to be thankful for their hard work.

I've often been embarrassed at the amount of arguing over English translations. Sometimes I wonder how we sound to others when we have hundreds of English translations to choose from, and so many other people in the world have not a single word of Scripture in their native tongue. Like a wealthy person complaining to a homeless

person about how hard it is to find good servants these days, I imagine.

My prayer is that someday we'll put these foolish controversies behind us and redirect our energy toward seeing that no one ever has to face life without God's Word in his or her own language. □

¹ Ray Comfort, *Springboards for Powerful Preaching* (Bellflower, California: Living Waters, 1993), pp. 38-39.

² Edward W. Goodrick, *Is My Bible The Inspired Word of God?* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1988), p. 71.

³ Goodrick, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 47, 67, 85.

Greg Hartman's favorite Bible is whichever one is closest to the door when he leaves for church.