



The History of the English Bible

By Dr. Daniel Wallace



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The History of the English Bible

Part I: From Wycliffe to King James (The Period of Challenge)

By
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Preface: This is the third part of a four-part lecture that was delivered at Lancaster Bible College in March, 2001, for the Staley Bible Lectureship. We are hoping to get permission to post all of the lectures as an audio tape on the Biblical Studies Foundation website. Here are some audio of a Textual Criticism series Dr. Wallace has done. Dr. Wallace is available as a conference speaker on “The History of the English Bible.” If your church is interested, contact him at wallace@bible.org for details.

Preface

There is an old Italian proverb about the nature of translation: “Traddutore, traditore!” This means simply, “Translators—traitors!” Of course, as you can see, something is lost in the translation of this pithy expression: there is great similarity in both the spelling and the pronunciation of the original saying, but these get diluted once they are put in English dress. Even the *translation* of this proverb illustrates its truth! Another Italian dictum expresses a similar sentiment: “All translation is a polite lie!”

Slightly less pessimistic about the nature of translation is this one-liner by the Jewish poet Hayyim Nachman Bialik, “He who reads the Bible in translation is like a man who kisses his bride through a veil.”¹ In a sense this is true, but as MacGregor retorted in his *Literary History of the Bible*², “Still, when a veil there must be, the translator’s task is to make it as gossamer-fine a veil as may be. Indeed, the face of even the most beautiful of women may be enhanced by a veil, if only the veil be worthy of her beauty.”³

You can understand, from these snippets, one of the reasons why there is sometimes great reticence to translate the Bible into other languages. For one thing, since the translator presumably already knows Greek and Hebrew, he does not need to do the translation *for himself*. He is doing it for others. Second, he may sense that his work is doomed from the start. His translation can never measure up to the original document. That great standard of comparison can only unmask the flaws in his own efforts. And third, because he is

¹ As quoted by C. C. Ryrie in *Formatting the Word of God* (Dallas: Bridwell Library, 1998) 11.

² Geddes MacGregor, *A Literary History of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 190.

³ As quoted by Ryrie, *Formatting*, 11.

translating the *Word of God*, the spiritual burden to *get it right* is often a very heavy weight. Every translator knows that he is also an interpreter, for *there is no translation without interpretation*. And the translator of the Bible knows that as an interpreter he is, in some sense, a teacher, and that (as James says), “not many of you should become teachers, because teachers will face a more severe judgment.”⁴ For the translator, this ‘severe judgment’ initially comes not from God but from man—because *every* translation of the Bible has been condemned by *someone* as soon as it rolled off the press. It is preeminently an act of selfless love that the translator engages in this task at all.⁵

Religious people of all faiths struggle with these attitudes. We should not be surprised to learn that in the Muslim religion, for example, the only true **Koran** is the one in Arabic. No translation may properly be called the Koran.⁶

On the other hand, there are strong impulses to translate the Bible into the language that the layperson can understand. These impulses merge in one particular branch of Christianity that ‘began’ on October 31, 1517, when a young Augustinian monk named Martin Luther challenged the church hierarchy of his day by posting 95 complaints on the door of the Wittenberg Church in Germany.⁷ Protestantism was born.

Introduction

The history of Protestantism is intimately tied to the Bible in three ways:

1. Protestantism teaches that the **Bible** is our *ultimate authority*, not tradition or personalities or experience—the Bible alone;
2. Protestantism teaches the priesthood of all believers which means, among other things, that *each* Christian has the privilege *and the responsibility* to know God and his revealed will in the Scriptures;
3. a natural outgrowth of these two principles is that *every* Christian needs to have access to the Scriptures in his or her own language. Therefore, Protestants—more than any other religious group of *any* religion—have translated the Scriptures and are passionate that all have access to the Word of God. In short, we are people of the Book.

The Bible is indispensable to our faith. Not just theoretically, but practically. Not just through preaching and teaching, but through one’s own individual reading and study. Since

⁴ A paraphrase of Jas 3.1, though catching the spirit of his statement.

⁵ After I wrote this point, I read Bruce Metzger’s treatment of the Vulgate in his *Early Versions of the New Testament*. To my astonishment and delight, I read again Jerome’s sentiment addressed to Pope Damasus in the preface to his revision of the Four Gospels (p. 333 in *Versions*), that echoes the same points.

⁶ So Dr. Abdullah Ibn Saleh Al-‘Ubaid in the Introduction to *Interpretation of the meanings of the Noble Qu’rân in the English Language, Summarized in One Volume* (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1995) 11: “Lastly, I would like to confirm that this translation is only the translation of the interpretation of the meanings of the Noble Qu’rân and it should neither be considered as the Qu’rân nor should it be termed as the Qu’rân but it is only the interpretation of its meanings, in order to bring it near to the minds of non-Arabs, with the hope that Allah may embrace them into His Mercy by opening their hearts, and that they may enter in Allah’s religion in crowds.”

⁷ There is some dispute whether Luther actually nailed his 95 theses to the church door, though it is evident that his theses were soon printed off and disseminated throughout Europe.

the Bible is God’s revelation of himself to us, we cannot know him without knowing *it*. Without the Scriptures, the God you worship is the god of your imagination.

This week I will be speaking on the history of the English Bible. It’s a fascinating history and a bloody history. It is high drama—a story that is as much political as it is personal, as much literary as it is religious. “No literary work has had so much influence on the English language as the translation of the Bible. Yet, the cost for providing the English speaking people with a Bible must be counted in the blood of the men who sought to translate it.”⁸

This morning, we will look at the earliest period, from Wycliffe to the King James.

I. From Wycliffe to King James: the Period of Challenge

Until John Wycliffe translated the New Testament, only small portions of the Bible had been translated into English. The English language traces its roots back to approximately AD 600; within a hundred years, the Psalms and a portion of the Gospels had been translated. In 735, the Venerable Bede, on his dying day, completed his translation of John’s Gospel. 165 years later, King Alfred the Great translated a *portion* of the Pentateuch. A few others during this period translated the Gospels or the Psalms, and little else.

Not only were these translations incomplete, but there were three other problems with them: (1) they were all translations from the Latin Vulgate, rather than from the original Greek and Hebrew texts; (2) they were not very good translations; and (3) for the most part, they were not accessible to lay folks, but were “translation ponies” to help the priests understand the Latin Vulgate better.

For over 300 years, no Bible translation into English was done, as far as we know. The Norman Invasion of 1066 was the fundamental reason: for the next three centuries English was only infrequently used for any written documents. Noblemen wrote in French—the language of the elite—and official church documents were in Latin. English was for peasants.

John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384) and his Bible (c. 1382)

Background

Picture, if you can, what it would be like to be alive in fourteenth century England. You are most likely a peasant, a farmer who toils to bring in an adequate harvest for the landowner. Like everyone else, you consider yourself a Christian, yet you struggle to understand God’s will. In the middle of this century, in 1348, the Bubonic Plague or Black Death hit England, and at least one out of four of your friends and relatives were dead within a few months. *One out of four!* Your grief for your loved ones is compounded by uncertainty over their eternal destiny. You doubt your own destiny, too. Your fear of purgatory *drives* your devotion. You find little comfort in the church; instead, your already thin pocketbook is relieved of its meager possessions by the sale of indulgences. The church only seems to be interested in your money and your confession. You long for a better life.

⁸ Introduction [by Donald Brake] to *The Wycliffe New Testament* (an Exact Facsimile of Rawlinson 259 in the Bodleian Library of Oxford University; John Purvey’s revision; Portland, OR: International Bible Publications, 1986) v.

Meanwhile, the Papacy is in a major crisis: the Popes for nearly three-fourths of the century were exiled to Avignon, France in what was called the “Babylonian Captivity.” How could the English respect and obey a Pope who lived in *France*—England’s mortal enemy!

On top of all this, the Church in England was in disarray. The finest government posts were often given to clergy, but this caused resentment in the nobles who wanted the posts for themselves. Rather than Democrats and Republicans, England had the pro-clergy and anti-clergy parties. If you ever wanted to question the structure of religious authority, now was the time. So much seemed wrong! And yet, if you even dared to speak to the local priest about finding God’s will in the Bible, you would be rebuffed for asking such a question! Besides that, he simply would not know the answer. He only read the Bible in Latin, and *only* those portions that were important for the liturgy. He had *never* read the whole Bible himself—ever. And besides, his Latin skills were not very good—just enough to mutter a few prayers in church from memory. Life—physically, socially, financially, spiritually—looked pretty bleak in fourteenth-century England.

Into this climate entered the ‘morningstar of the Reformation,’ a man named John Wycliffe.

Wycliffe was born sometime between 1325 and 1330; he was educated at Oxford, earning his doctorate in theology when in his 40s, in 1372. He was the preeminent Oxford theologian of his day. Even though he was a Roman Catholic priest, he did not hesitate to speak against the excesses of the Church. Wycliffe did not consider the clergy to have *any special rights*—even though he belonged to their class. And his views were grounded in Scripture.

He began to chip away at unbiblical practices and beliefs in the church. Not only did he reject the doctrine of transubstantiation—the Catholic teaching that the bread and wine of Communion literally become the flesh and blood of Christ—but he also rejected *all* church hierarchy, including papal authority. To Wycliffe, the Bible rather than the Pope was our ultimate authority.

His views did not go unchallenged of course. He was fired from his post at Oxford in 1382. Throughout his lifetime, five papal edicts were issued for his arrest. But because England was distancing itself from Rome, he found protection in powerful, anti-clergy nobles. In 1384, he died of natural causes and was buried in the Lutterworth church cemetery where he was pastor.

Wycliffe believed that each man was directly accountable to God. But if each person was directly accountable to God, then they needed to have the Bible translated into their *own* language. You can catch Wycliffe’s passion and directness in these words of his:

Those Heretics who pretend that the laity need not know God’s law but that the knowledge which priests have had imparted to them by word of mouth is sufficient, do not deserve to be listened to. For Holy Scriptures is the faith of the Church, and the more widely its true meaning becomes known the better it will be. Therefore since the laity should know the faith, it should be taught in whatever language is most easily comprehended... [After all,]

Christ and His apostles taught the people in the language best known to them.⁹

That's called 'in your face' preaching! Wycliffe did not pull any punches; and he didn't know how to be polite when heaven and hell were hanging in the balance!

John Wycliffe was the impetus behind a translation of the NT into English that was accomplished in c. 1382. He most likely did very little of the actual translation, but was the prime mover in its production. The OT was done entirely by others.

His followers, known as Lollards, were poor Oxford scholars who preached the Word. They had a huge impact on the common folk, largely because they counted their own lives as *nothing* for the cause of Christ. In the two decades after Wycliffe's death, many Lollards were burned at the stake, some even with their Bibles hanging from their necks to be burned with them.¹⁰

Text

The text that Wycliffe and his associates translated from was the **Latin** Vulgate rather than the original Greek and Hebrew. Now, a word should be said about the Latin Vulgate because this will be important as we look at the English Bible the rest of this week.

The Vulgate was the official Bible in western Europe from the late fourth century on. It was a translation that St. Jerome had made, by the order of Pope Damasus. And since Greek had begun to die out in western Europe after Constantine moved the capital to the east, Latin naturally became the language of the people in the west. By the middle ages, Greek was completely unknown in western Europe. (It would not be studied in any university until 1458, at the University of Paris.) All the clergy in the west for a thousand years had to learn Latin, but not Greek or Hebrew. In terms of longevity, the Latin Vulgate is the most influential translation of the Bible in history.

Back to Wycliffe: As I said, Wycliffe did **not** translate from the original Greek and Hebrew. And as good as the Latin Vulgate was, there were severe shortcomings in its translation. For one thing, Latin does not have the definite article. That is a gift that the *Greeks* gave to Europe. But the article occurs in the Greek NT almost 20,000 times—understanding its use is vital for hundreds of passages. And yet, Wycliffe knew none of this, since he only used the Latin text as his base.

Translation

The Wycliffe Bible went through two editions—one in 1382 and in c. 1395, the second by Wycliffe's assistant, John Purvey.¹¹ And although Purvey's revision was a significant improvement, one could hardly call either version a masterpiece of English prose. But the first edition was *slavishly* literal—even to the point of retaining the Latin word order when it made no sense in English!¹² The Wycliffe Bible illustrates on every page that a 'word-

⁹ John Wycliffe, *Speculum Secularium Dominorum, Opera Minora*, ed. John Loserth (London: Wycliff Society, 1913) 74; cited in the Introduction to the *Wycliffe New Testament*, vii.

¹⁰ Ron Minton, *The Making and Preservation of the Bible* (n.p.; November, 2000) 216.

¹¹ Oxford MS in the Bodleian Library, 959 E, is probably the original first edition of the Wycliffe Bible. The style is extremely wooden.

¹² Bruce, *History*, has a nice comparison of both editions in Heb 1.1-4, with discussion (15-16).

for-word' translation is not necessarily an accurate translation, because the *meaning* of the original is not communicated clearly in this kind of rendering.

Significance

What is the significance of the Wycliffe translation?

1. It was the first complete Bible in English—in fact, the first complete Bible in *any* modern European language!
2. It indirectly began to break down the power structures of the political-religious machinery of the Roman Catholic church. Lay folks did not need to rely on the priests to access God. And they could know his will and even challenge their spiritual leaders. It is no wonder that by 1408 even *reading* the Bible in English was outlawed.¹³ People owned a copy at risk of liberty and life. So powerful was Wycliffe's influence in fact that in 1415 the Pope decreed that his bones should be dug up, burned, and the ashes scattered on the River Swift.¹⁴
3. The translation was completed more than sixty years *before* the invention of the movable-type printing press. *All* Wycliffe Bibles were thus handwritten copies. This lessened its impact considerably. And even though one Bible could take up to a year to copy, thousands were made.

William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536) and his New Testament (1525-1536)

Background

No new English translations occurred between Wycliffe's and Tyndale's. One hundred and thirty years passed without progress. A part of the reason was no doubt that the 1408 British law against any Bible in English was still in effect. It would be risky enough just to make a copy of Wycliffe's Bible!

Meanwhile, there were encouraging signs in the rest of Europe. Italian, French, Spanish, and Dutch Bibles appeared in the 1400s, most likely inspired by Wycliffe's pioneering efforts. The stage was becoming set for the single most influential Bible translator of all time.

Several major events took place between the time of Wycliffe and Tyndale.

1. For nearly forty years—1378-1417—the “Great Schism” was tearing apart the very fabric of religious authority in Europe: during this time there were *two rival Popes*—one in Avignon and one in Rome!¹⁵ No one knew who the vicar of Christ on earth was!
2. Invention of the **movable-type** printing press (c. 1454). Gutenberg's first full-length book: *Latin Vulgate Bible*.

¹³ Known as the Constitutions of Oxford. See Bruce, *History*, 20-23.

¹⁴ This decree was not carried out until 1428, 43 years after Wycliffe's death.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 12, notes that “The prestige of the papacy had fallen very low, partly by reason of the ‘Babylonian Captivity’ of the Popes at Avignon, where they maintained their residence from 1309 to 1378, under the control of the French kings, England's hereditary enemies; and partly by reason of the ‘Great Schism’ which followed it, when for nearly forty years (1378-1417) there were two rival Popes, one at Rome and the other at Avignon, one recognized by some European powers and the other recognized by others.”

3. **1453**: Turks invade Byzantium, where Emperor Constantine had 1100 years earlier moved his capital to. In those 1100 years, Greek learning had disappeared from western Europe. But with the invasion of Byzantium, Greek scholars took their manuscripts and fled into Europe. Five years later, Greek is offered for the first time at a European university. The Reformation and Renaissance would be born as a result of the rediscovery of classical Greek and of the Greek New Testament.
4. The spirit of **adventure** took off. The new world was discovered in 1492. Men became risk-takers like never before.
5. The near-simultaneous events of the Turkish invasion of Byzantium and the invention of the printing press were the catalyst for the production of the **first published Greek New Testament** on March 1, 1516.
6. **October 31, 1517**: the Reformation is born when Luther challenges the Roman Catholic Church in Wittenberg.

Thus, challenges to the religious status quo, courage of convictions, knowledge of the ancient sources, and dissemination of information to the masses joined hands at a decisive time in European history. Tyndale's Bible would be born in this milieu.

William Tyndale was trained in Greek and Hebrew. He earned his bachelor's degree from Oxford in 1512 (at the ripe old age 16 or 17!), and his master's degree in 1515. He later studied at Cambridge, to round out his education. In due time, he became fluent in six or seven languages. In short, Tyndale was no dummy! Further, his sense of English style was unparalleled.

As he was contemplating a fresh translation of the Bible in the 1520s, he came to the realization that it was impossible to do this work in England.¹⁶ The 1408 edict against Bible translation was still in effect. Besides, Tyndale could find no one in England who knew Hebrew. So he traveled to Germany—and there he was introduced to rabbis from whom he learned the language of the Old Testament. While on the Continent, he translated much of the Bible into English. He could not return to England for fear of his life.

He had a passion for getting the Word of God to lay folks. He wanted the boy behind the plough to know more of the Word of God than the literati of his day. His prayer would come true.¹⁷

By 1525 he had completed his first translation of the NT, but it would not get printed until 1526. *Three* copies of this first edition exist today, only one of which—discovered just a few years ago—is completely intact.¹⁸

Tyndale later revised the NT substantially, and the revision was a bona fide masterpiece. He even coined some new words that found their way into the English vocabulary for the next five centuries—words such as 'Passover,' 'peacemaker,'

¹⁶ Further, in 1523, the bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, refused to allow his work to be done.

¹⁷ "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more Scripture than thou dost" he said to a religious man in 1523.

¹⁸ This lone copy was discovered in 1996. Cf. Minton, *Making*, 226.

‘scapegoat,’ and even the adjective ‘beautiful’ were coined by Tyndale.¹⁹ Altogether, he produced five editions of the NT, but the third edition of 1534 is the one most remembered.

Tyndale also did substantial work on the OT, but he did not complete the task. As far as we know, he translated through 2 Chronicles.

He was kidnapped in 1535 in Antwerp, and burned at the stake the next year for heresy.²⁰ His charge? A corrupt translation of the Bible. The reality? A *superb* translation of the Bible. But the clergy were ostensibly afraid that common folk could not understand the Bible; they needed the clergy and *tradition* to interpret it for them.^{21, 22}

Tyndale’s dying words were “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes!” But Tyndale did not know that just a few months before his death a version of the Bible in English—based largely on his own work—had already been printed in England with King Henry VIII’s blessing. “In the sense which Tyndale intended, the King of England’s eyes were already opening when he voiced his dying prayer.”²³

Text

Although Tyndale consulted Luther’s German translation and the Latin Vulgate to help him over the hard places, his translation of the NT was based on the Greek text. He used primarily Erasmus’ third edition.²⁴

Translation

The 1534 edition was a major departure from 1526. It was wonderful English and a lucid translation for its day. Tyndale knew the biblical languages better than any Englishman at the time,²⁵ and he knew English better than most. He turned good Greek into good English.

¹⁹ Cf. Minton, *Making*, 223.

²⁰ A letter was discovered last century that was from Tyndale himself while he was in prison awaiting execution. He had asked his captor for warmer clothes since he was quite cold, especially his head. As well, he asked if he could have a Hebrew Bible and a Hebrew dictionary to pass the time profitably. Like Paul (2 Tim 4:13), we do not know whether the request was ever granted.

²¹ In reality, they were afraid of the potential loss of control. Once the people had the Bible, the religious leaders could no longer interpret God’s will for their lives without dispute.

²² Tyndale did change some things that clearly bothered the Catholic clergy: “congregation” for “church”; “elder” for “priest.” Although ἐκκλησία usually took on a technical nuance in the NT, Tyndale, with some justification, translated it as “congregation.” This is because “church” had by this time become so strongly associated with Roman Catholic structures that one could hardly read the text and think otherwise. Only later in the Reformation period, when the Protestant Church was able to get firmly planted, could readers see “church” and not think of Catholicism.

His translation of πρεσβύτερος as “elder” is quite accurate (cf. Titus 1:5) and much better than “priest” (*sacerdos*).

²³ Bruce, *History*, 52.

²⁴ Unfortunately, Tyndale’s 1534 edition retained the *Comma Johanneum* of Erasmus’ third edition without comment, thus probably affecting the KJV at this point as well.

²⁵ An interesting example of this is found in 1 Tim 2:12. He translates as follows: “I suffer not a woman to teach, neither to have authority over a man: but for [her] to be in silence.” The KJV here has “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” The key difference is in the translation of αυτην. Tyndale renders it “have authority,” while the KJV renders it “usurp authority.” From what I can gather, the verb did not bear the force of “usurp” until Chrysostom gave it that

Significance

It is impossible to overestimate the significance of Tyndale's translation.

1. The first English NT after the age of printing.
2. The first English NT translated directly from the Greek.
3. The first translation to use *italics* for words that were *not* in the text. (This practice has curiously continued to the present day in the NASB, in spite of the fact that italics are now universally used in other writing for emphasis, *not* for absence.)
4. Heavily influenced the KJV: In 1940, Prof. J. Isaacs wrote of Tyndale's accomplishment: "His simple directness, his magical simplicity of phrase, his modest music, have given an authority to his wording that has imposed itself on all later versions.... Nine-tenths of the Authorized New Testament is still Tindale, and the best is still his."²⁶ The introduction to a reprint of Tyndale's New Testament makes the quip: "Astonishment is still voiced that the dignitaries who prepared the 1611 Authorized Version for King James spoke so often with one voice—apparently miraculously. Of course they did: the voice (never acknowledged by them) was Tyndale's."²⁷

In rapid succession came three translations, all inferior to Tyndale's, but nevertheless important landmarks in the history of the Bible in English.

The Coverdale Bible (1535)

The Coverdale Bible (1535) was the work of Myles Coverdale, Tyndale's assistant. He did not translate directly from the Greek and Hebrew, but did use Luther's German translation, more than one Latin text, and Tyndale's OT portions. And he did *complete* the whole Bible—and thus Coverdale's became the first complete Bible *printed* in English. It

spin in his comments on this text (cf. Moulton-Milligan, Liddell-Scott-Jones, Knight's article in *NTS* [c. 1984], etc.). Further, "usurp" was not the *predominant* meaning of *aujgentevw* until the ninth century A.D. But since the word occurs less than 125 times in all of Greek literature (according to a search of the *TLG* database of 64 million words from Homer to A.D. 1453), the KJV translators were at a loss. Hence, they relied on Erasmus' Latin (which he put forth as a correction of Jerome's) of *usurpare* (Oxford Latin Dictionary gives as the first definition of this term, "To take possession of (property) on one's own initiative (and without strict legal claim)"). Jerome's translation, incidentally, was *dominare* (OLD gives as its first definition of this verb, "To exercise sovereignty, act as a despot, rule"). Thus, Tyndale's translation was more accurate to the Greek than either Jerome's or Erasmus' (though Jerome's was fairly literal, since there is no verb in Latin that is a cognate to either *potestas* or *auctoris*. Thus, if a verb has to be used, *dominare* is the most neutral term available and therefore the most accurate.)

It is a remarkable thing that many today read this text as though the KJV was the accurate rendering. Many women teachers preface their remarks by saying, "I am not usurping anyone's authority; this authority has been given me by the elders." But that is apparently not the point of 1 Tim 2:12. Most modern translations render the term neutrally (cf., e.g., RSV, NKJV, NIV ["have authority"], RV, ASV ["have dominion"], NASB ["exercise authority"], etc. Remarkably, even the NRSV, with its strong bent toward inclusive language and egalitarianism [as in 1 Tim 3:2: "married only once" for "husband of one wife"] here reads "have authority"). Fee, in his brief little commentary, says the verb means "to domineer" without further justification. This certainly looks like *petitio principii*.

²⁶ Quoted in Bruce, 44.

²⁷ *Tyndale's New Testament: Translated from the Greek by William Tyndale in 1534. In a modern-spelling edition and with an introduction by David Daniell.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

was Coverdale's translation that Henry VIII had already permitted to be printed when Tyndale uttered his dying words. The most innovative thing in this Bible was that it placed the Apocrypha—those books that Roman Catholics accept as canonical but which Protestants reject—at the *end* of the OT rather than interspersed throughout the OT. All previous OT translations had the Apocrypha distributed throughout the OT. All *Protestant* Bibles that were to follow, if they included the Apocrypha at all, included them as an appendix—just like Coverdale had done.

Matthew's Bible (1537)

In 1537, Matthew's Bible appeared. This Bible was the work of John Rogers, whose pen name was Thomas Matthew. He combined Coverdale's OT with Tyndale's NT.²⁸ But Rogers also added about 2000 notes, many of them controversial, making this the first revision of Tyndale's NT. This Bible is sometimes called the "Wife-Beater's Bible" because the marginal note at 1 Peter 3.7 says, "If [the wife] be not obedient and healpfull unto [her husband, he] endeavoureth to beate the feare of God into her..."²⁹ That the moniker 'Wife-Beater's Bible' was soon given to this version at least should comfort us that many of our ancestors also thought that this little comment was inappropriate! Although not related to this note, Rogers would become, in 1555, the first martyr to be burned at the stake under Mary Tudor—or 'Bloody Mary'—the Catholic monarch.³⁰

The Great Bible (1539)

Matthew's and Coverdale's Bibles both had Henry VIII's permission to be printed. Stimulating their popularity but also instigating their demise, in September, 1538 the king ordered an English Bible to be placed in every church. The churches began to use the Matthew Bible because it was a large folio version suitable for public reading, while Coverdale's had come out in a significantly smaller size. The king's edict had in fact specified that each church was to have in its possession "one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English"—which ruled out all but Matthew's.

For eight months—from September 1538 to April 1539—England's devotion to the Bible was at an all-time high. The king's order not only was that every church should have a copy of Scripture on hand, but that "ye shall discourage no man... from the reading or hearing of the ... Bible, but shall expressly provoke, stir and exhort every person to read the same, as that which is the very lively Word of God..." This command was followed so enthusiastically that laypeople were reading the Bible *aloud* to their fellow parishioners while the preacher was giving his sermon! Eight months later the king issued a proclamation forbidding this disruptive behavior.

²⁸ "It was licensed before the Coverdale Bible (both in 1537) and, thus, by the providence of God, Tyndale's revised Bible was the first ever to be licensed by the king" (Minton, *Making*, 235).

²⁹ So Minton, *Making*, 235. Bruce, *History*, however, attributes this to the Bible by Bishop Becke (83-84).

³⁰ Now if Rogers had been beheaded, then perhaps a case could be made that this note on 1 Pet 3.7 was the cause of his demise, for the full note said "If [the wife] be not obedient and healpfull unto –her husband, he] endeavoureth to beate the feare of God into her *heade*, that thereby she maye be compelled to learne her dutie, and to do it." Bruce comments, though attributing this note to Becke, "One wonders if the editor penned the second part of this note with his tongue in his cheek; even if he did, it is better not to indulge one's sense of humour in Bible annotations, for readers are predisposed to treat all Bible annotations seriously!" (*History*, 84).

What was needed, however, was a translation as good as Matthew's but *without the notes*! So Cromwell commissioned Myles Coverdale to publish a new Bible. It *had* to be larger than Matthew's because of the king's injunction. It was thus called the *Great Bible*—not because of its literary quality, but because of its enormous size. Although these Bibles were *chained* down to prevent theft, one has to wonder how necessary that really was!

Even though the Great Bible was edited by Coverdale, it was based on the Matthew Bible. Coverdale did not know Greek or Hebrew, but Rogers did. So Coverdale simply took Matthew's Bible, revised it, and deleted the notes. It thus became the second revision of Tyndale, after Matthew's Bible.³¹

But bishops, many of whom were still Roman Catholic, were offended at this Bible, because it separated the Apocrypha from the rest of the OT and because it did not conform to the Latin Vulgate.³² Not only this, but in the closing years of Henry VIII's reign, the king swung the religious pendulum once again. In 1543 Parliament forbade any public, unauthorized exposition of Scripture—as well as all *private* reading of the Bible among the lower classes. Three years later, Henry outdid the Parliament by banning *all* copies of Tyndale and Coverdale.

“The ban on the Bibles of Tyndale and Coverdale was a monumental piece of absurdity”³³ because the Great Bible was essentially Tyndale's and was edited by Coverdale!

The Geneva Bible (1557 [NT], 1560 [whole Bible])

When Edward VI, Henry's son, became king, the Reformation was back in swing. But his reign did not last long. In 1553 Mary Tudor, Edward's sister, ascended the throne.³⁴ She reversed Edward's Protestant advances, returning the country to Catholicism. And she began to systematically burn both Bibles and Protestants. Many Protestant scholars fled from England to Geneva, where the famous Reformed theologian, John Calvin, was living. Here, they produced a magnificent Bible, though it appeared originally only in quarto size.

One of these Reformers, William Whittingham (who happened to be Calvin's brother-in-law), completed his translation of the NT in 1557. He and other Reformers worked on the whole Bible, and three years later the OT and a *revised* NT appeared.

The significance of the Geneva Bible lies in the following:

1. The Geneva Bible was the first English Bible translated entirely from the Greek and Hebrew. And it was the first translation done by a committee. Still, it relied heavily on Tyndale's work as a base, and can properly be regarded as the third revision of Tyndale.³⁵

³¹ The Great Bible went through seven editions between 1539 and 1541. The second edition of 1540 made a considerable advance over the first printing, especially in OT poetical books (Bruce, *History*, 70).

³² In 1542, the Upper House of Convocation of Canterbury demanded a revision of the Great Bible, in conformity to the Latin Vulgate.

³³ Bruce, *History*, 79.

³⁴ “No Bible translation was made while Edward VI was king (1547-1553). Edward was the son of Henry VIII. An attempt was made to crown Lady Jane Gray as Edward's successor, but Mary Tudor, one of Henry's daughters (by Catherine of Aragon) was chosen. Mary died in 1558 and Elizabeth (her half sister) began her long reign.”

³⁵ Matthew and Great Bible are the first two.

2. It was Calvinistic in its notes (and the notes were rather plentiful), exalting the Lord and his glory.³⁶
3. It was the first English Bible with *verse divisions*. This was due, for the NT at least, to Stephanus' fourth edition of the Greek NT (1551), the first Greek NT (or NT of any kind) with verse divisions.³⁷ As a sidenote, the effect of this was not altogether healthy, for with the addition of verse numbers came the *deletion* of paragraphing. This certainly had an effect on proof texting or quoting a single verse here or there out of context. Not until the Revised Version of 1881 was paragraphing used in an English Bible again (with verse numbers put in the margins). (Anachronistically, the NASB has continued the former policy, noting the new paragraph only with a bold number.)
4. This was also the first Bible to use italics *extensively* for words that were not in the original text.
5. This was the Bible the Pilgrims took with them when they came to America and landed at Plymouth. It was also the Bible that Shakespeare used.
6. The Geneva was produced originally only in quarto size, most likely because it was produced in Europe and shipped back to England. Thus, although its text and notes are exquisite, the print is small and the volume inelegant. Nevertheless, while the Great Bible was used in churches, the Geneva was used in homes.
7. The influence of this Bible on the KJV was enormous. The KJV translators employed this as much as Tyndale's (of course, much of Tyndale was incorporated into the Geneva). And although King James despised the Geneva Bible, in the original preface to the KJV the Bible is quoted several times—and every time it is the *Geneva* version that is quoted, not the King James! This was an implicit and perhaps unwitting admission of the Geneva Bible's superiority.
8. This is also known as the “Breeches' Bible.” This is because at Genesis 3:7, Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together and made them into “breeches.”³⁸
9. Finally, the Geneva Bible had a long and stellar history. During the 45-year reign of Queen Elizabeth nearly 100 editions of the Geneva Bible were published! Even fifty years after the KJV appeared, the Geneva Bible was the most popular Bible in England. Ultimately, it would not survive because of politics: a new king would come along who wanted his own translation—one that was not so Calvinistic.

³⁶ Nevertheless, the explicit notes of a Calvinistic interpretation were very few.

³⁷ Stephanus put in the verse numbers while traveling from Paris to Lyons. It is sometimes suggested that this explains why the verses are broken at such strange places: Stephanus must have been riding in the carriage, marking down the verse numbers, when the carriage hit a bump in the road! But his cryptic reference to when he wrote in the verse numbers is more probably taken to mean that he wrote them while resting at the inns along the way.

³⁸ Other names have been given to several Bibles throughout history. For example, one of the early editions of the King James is called the “Wicked Bible” because it left out the “not” in the seventh commandment (Exod 20:14): “Thou shalt commit adultery”!

The Bishops' Bible (1568)

“The instant success of the Geneva Bible made it impossible to go on using the Great Bible for reading in church; its deficiencies became all too obvious in the light of the new version.”³⁹ But the Geneva Bible clearly could not be used in ecclesiastical settings: it was too Calvinistic for the English clergy and was so popular among the lower classes that it was politically incorrect to use from the pulpit!⁴⁰

The Bishops' Bible thus came on the scene in 1568. This was a pulpit Bible, based on the Great Bible. It is thus properly considered the fourth revision of Tyndale. It was called the Bishops' Bible because it was produced by bishops. But it was too wooden, too pedestrian a translation. Even Elizabeth never officially recognized this translation. It could not compete with the Geneva which had appeared eight years earlier and was a much better translation. The Bishops' Bible never caught on and its last printing occurred in 1606. Ironically, this inferior translation became the *official* base that the King James translators were directed to use in making their version.

The Rheims-Douai Bible (1582 [NT], 1609-1610 [whole Bible])

After Bloody Mary's short reign, Elizabeth came on the scene as the new queen. And she was a Protestant. This time the *Catholic* scholars fled to Europe! It must be remembered that the Protestants were not the only ones to get persecuted. Blood flowed both ways.

The Catholics wanted their own English Bible. This was not because they had now agreed that lay people should have a Bible in their own tongues. Rather, since they really could not stop laypeople from reading the Bible, they at least wanted them to read a “correct” version of it. Nevertheless, in the preface to this version, the readership was intended to be priests and other dignitaries. The masses were discouraged from reading the Bible, but if they were going to read one, this had better be it.

The Rheims-Douai Bible also had some influence on the wording of the KJV.⁴¹ This Bible was—as is the case with *all* Catholic Bibles until the mid-twentieth century—based on the *Latin* Vulgate, rather than directly from the Greek or Hebrew texts. This was because the Council of Trent (1544) had decreed that Bibles should be translated from the Latin. It was not until Vatican II before this was rescinded.

This brings us to the dawn of a new era, which began with the KJV. The first era of English Bible translation thus lasted from 1382—1610, or nearly 230 years. It was a period marked by two things: on the one hand, by a *profound* concern that every Christian have access to God's revealed will in the Bible. On the other hand, the church hierarchy suppressed this effort—first by killing the translators and burning their Bibles. And when

³⁹ Bruce, *History*, 92-93.

⁴⁰ So Minton, *Making*, 243.

⁴¹ A preliminary draft of an essay in a Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia, produced by an international team of scholars, overstated the influence that the Rheims-Douai had on the KJV, while neglecting to mention that Tyndale had *any* influence on the KJV! I noted this in my review of the preliminary draft that was sent to me by the senior editor; it remains to be seen whether the correction will be made.

that failed, an ‘authorized’ translation was made that tried to stem the tide of the Protestant heresy.⁴²

⁴² This could be nuanced more: it was also the Anglican bishops who were uncomfortable with the Protestant translations.

The History of the English Bible

Part II: The Reign of the King James

(The Era of Elegance)

Daniel B. Wallace, Ph.D.

March 2001

Editor's note: This is the second part of a four-part lecture that was delivered at Lancaster Bible College in March, 2001, for the Staley Bible Lectureship. We are hoping to get permission to post all of the lectures as an audio tape on the Biblical Studies Foundation website. Here are some audio of a Textual Criticism series Dr. Wallace has done. Dr. Wallace is available as a conference speaker on "The History of the English Bible." If your church is interested, contact him for details.

Preface: We left England with two competing Bible translations: the Bishops' Bible that was used in the churches, and the Geneva Bible that was read in the homes. By far, the Geneva Bible was the more popular, and this created a problem for the clergy: they needed a translation in the *churches* that would be revered by the masses.

A. The Making of the Authorized Version

1. The Hampton Court Conference

An opportunity for fixing this problem presented itself when Queen Elizabeth died in 1603 and a new monarch came on the scene. James VI had already ruled over Scotland for thirty-seven (37) years when he became James I of England.

The following January (1604) the king summoned the religious leaders of the country to Hampton Court to air out ecclesiastical grievances of all sorts. By far the most important matter that was settled at this conference was the resolution

That a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all Churches of England in time of divine service.⁴³

The original document that authorized this new translation is kept in the Manuscript Room at Cambridge University. I had the opportunity to see it while I was living in Cambridge on my last sabbatical (1995), but I never did. The reason wasn't lack of interest, but rather that there were so many more important MSS to look at that I never found the time to get around to this one!⁴⁴ Had I known that I would be giving this lecture today to

⁴³ As quote by Bruce, *History*, 96.

⁴⁴ Chief among these was Codex Cantabrigiensis (a.k.a. Codex Bezae), which I was able to see—even though the procedure took three weeks to get permission! Peter Head and I spent half a day with that magnificent and eccentric document, and were the first persons granted permission to do so in four years due to its fragile condition.

you all, I am quite sure that I would have made the time to see the famous Hampton Court document!

The proposal for a new translation came from a Puritan, Dr. John Reynolds. And although it did not meet with unanimous approval, it did meet with *James'* approval. And that settled the matter. At one point the king gushed, "I could never yet see a Bible well translated in English; but I think that, of all, that of *Geneva* is the *worst*"!⁴⁵

Why would James disapprove of the Geneva Bible so strongly? After all, this had been the official Bible in Scotland during his reign there. His animosity was most likely not due to the translation as much as the *notes*. He explicitly mentioned the comment at Exodus 1.19 as problematic: the Geneva margin suggested that the Hebrew midwives were justified in disobeying the *king's* order to kill all Hebrew baby boys.

In other words, the impulse for producing the King James Bible (or, as it is frequently called in England, the Authorized Version) initially came from two groups, one religious and the other political—both of them at the top of their respective food chains. It is not altogether unfair to say that the motive to produce this grand work was more to *protect* the status quo than to meet the needs of the people. In this respect, the King James Bible resembled the Roman Catholic Rheims-Douai version rather than its own Protestant predecessors of the sixteenth century.

2. The Procedure of the Translators

James was enthusiastic about the new project and took a leading role in getting it off the ground. In fact, as far as we know, he wrote up the rules for who the translators should be, how they should be organized, and what principles they were to follow. But he did not do any of the actual translation—in spite of the fact that many people think of the King James Bible as a version translated by him!

James assigned six panels of scholars to do the work: three for the Old Testament, two for the New Testament, and one for the Apocrypha. Two teams met at Oxford, two met at Cambridge, and two at Westminster Abbey. Altogether, there were forty-seven (47) men who worked on this new version.

Among the rules that the translators were supposed to follow, two are noteworthy: (1) Although the translators were to rigorously consult the Greek and Hebrew texts, they should retain the wording of the Bishops' Bible wherever possible. (2) This version must not have any marginal notes—except those that explained the Greek and Hebrew words or cross-referenced other passages. But the translators did not follow these rules religiously, especially the first one.

3. The Textual Basis

The translators did not consult any Greek or Hebrew *manuscripts* as they did their revision. Instead, they based their work on existing published texts. The Old Testament textual basis has not changed *too* dramatically since the sixteenth century, but the New Testament text has gone through enormous changes. The text that the King James translators used was principally the Stephanus text of 1550 (third edition), which, in turn, relied essentially on Erasmus' third edition of 1522—the *same* Greek text that Tyndale had

⁴⁵ Ibid. (italics added).

used. We'll talk more about the Greek text behind the Authorized Version in a little while, when we discuss problems with the KJV.

4. Influences

The KJV was not a brand new translation, but a revision of earlier works. Although it was *supposed* to be based on the Bishops' Bible—departing from it only where necessary—it really was *influenced* by many translations. At Oxford University is a manuscript that gives us a fascinating glimpse into the translation work—almost ‘behind the scenes,’ as it were. The manuscript is a copy of the Gospels from the Bishops' Bible that was used by the translators through various stages of revision. You can detect the various groups that worked the document over. Handwritten notes mark up almost every verse of the text. The first team made their revision marks by hand, completing the work within a relatively short period of time. (Had the KJV appeared in 1608, when the first revision of the whole Bible was virtually completed, it would have looked substantially like a revision of the Bishops' Bible. But more work needed to be done.) Then, the manuscript was sent to a final revision committee. And they marked up the text still further. One of the most fascinating aspects of the work is that as the manuscript went through its stages of revision, the new version kept looking less and less like the Bishops' Bible and more and more like Tyndale!⁴⁶

Besides Tyndale's translation, the Geneva Bible also had a huge influence on the KJ—especially in the Old Testament books that Tyndale had not translated. Further, in the original preface to the KJV the Bible is quoted several times—and every time it is the *Geneva* version that is quoted, not the King James!

And perhaps most surprisingly, the Rheims-Douai version had some impact as well. The Old Testament was completed only a year or two before the KJV was published—it was thus too late to have an influence. But the New Testament of the Catholics had appeared in 1582, and it made its way into the Authorized Version in a few places. Besides using some of the language of the Catholic New Testament—especially Latinisms, or traditional ecclesiastical terms—the KJV also follows the textual basis of the Rheims-Douai—that is, the *Latin Vulgate*—in nearly 100 places. In ten places, the Authorized Version “abandons all known Greek manuscripts for the Latin Vulgate.”⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the KJV was still much closer to the Geneva and Tyndale than to anything else. It may properly be regarded as the *fifth* revision of Tyndale. As we noted yesterday, 90% of the King James New Testament was really Tyndale's translation. Two statements made yesterday about Tyndale's influence are worth repeating. First, Prof. Isaacs said:

“[Tyndale's] simple directness, his magical simplicity of phrase, his modest music, have given an authority to his wording that has imposed itself

⁴⁶ For documentation and actual plates, see Allen and Jacobs, *The Coming of the King James Gospels*. On the epistles and Revelation, see David Norton, “John Bois' Notes on the Revision of the King James Bible New Testament: A New Manuscript,” *The Library* 18.4 (1996) 328-46. See brief discussion of this article in Minton, *Making*, 309.

⁴⁷ Minton, *Making*, 315. Of course, several of these renderings were also found in Erasmus' Greek text, especially in the last six verses of Revelation.

on *all* later versions.... Nine-tenths of the Authorized New Testament is still Tindale, and the best is still his.”⁴⁸

Second, the introduction to a reprint of Tyndale’s New Testament declares: “Astonishment is still voiced that the dignitaries who prepared the 1611 Authorized Version for King James spoke so often with one voice—apparently miraculously. Of course they did: the voice (never acknowledged by them) was Tyndale’s.”⁴⁹

At the same time, the King James translators painstakingly worked over the translation and produced a whole new work. On many occasions, it sacrificed Tyndale’s accuracy for a more elegant rendition. It is obvious from a comparison of the King James New Testament with that of Tyndale that the *leading* principle of the King James translators was *not* faithfulness to the Greek, but elegance in English.

And when it came to the *Apocrypha*, the King James followed its Protestant ancestors rather than the Catholic tradition by placing the Apocrypha at the end of the Old Testament.

B. Publication and Reception

When the Authorized Version first appeared, it was published with quite a few marginal notes. These notes were not just intended to explain the Hebrew or Greek word, but had diverse purposes. Over 6500 notes appeared in the Old Testament alone, most of which gave a “more literal meaning of the original Hebrew.”⁵⁰ The Apocrypha added another 1000 notes, and the New Testament had almost 800. Altogether, there were nearly **8500** marginal notes in the 1611 KJV. On a few occasions, the notes indicated textual variants. And a great number of notes explained to the reader that the translators were undecided as to the meaning of the original. Of significance here is the sensitivity that the translators had to the readers.

In the preface entitled, “The Translators to the Reader,” “They mention that some readers [may] have misgivings about the alternative renderings suggested in the margin, on the ground that they may appear to shake the authority of Scripture in deciding points of controversy.”⁵¹

But these translators had no illusions that theirs was the final word on the Word of God. They knew that later discoveries and research would help to clear up the meaning of the original. Unfortunately, this preface is no longer printed in the KJV. Its omission has been one of the major reasons why some religious groups believe that the KJV is the *only* inspired Bible, that the KJV is perfect in every way. As one scholar quipped, “Some people would prefer a false appearance of certainty to an honest admission of doubt.”⁵²

In the subsequent centuries, a great deal of research and discovery has indeed helped us to understand better the original text. Translations *always* need to be updated when new archeological and manuscript discoveries are made.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Bruce, 44.

⁴⁹ *Tyndale’s New Testament: Translated from the Greek by William Tyndale in 1534. In a modern-spelling edition and with an introduction by David Daniell.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

⁵⁰ As quoted in Minton, *Making*, 351.

⁵¹ Bruce, *History*, 102-3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 103.

The preface also *explicitly* denied that the Authorized Version was perfect. The actual statement is important to grasp; listen to what it had to say:

To those who point out defects in [the translators' works], they answer that *perfection is never attainable by man*, but the word of God may be recognized in the very meanest translation of the Bible, just as the king's speech addressed to Parliament remains the king's speech when translated into other languages than that in which it was spoken, even if it be not translated word for word, and even if some of the renderings are capable of improvement. To those who complain that [the translators] have introduced so many changes in relation to the older English version, they answer by expressing surprise that revision and correction should be imputed as faults. The whole history of Bible translation in any language, they say, is a history of repeated revision and correction.⁵³

A few observations on this statement are in order. (1) The translators do not equate their work with the *inspired* word of God; they explicitly deny the perfection of the KJB. (2) They freely admit that even the worst translation of Scripture is still to be regarded as the Word of God. (3) They make a qualitative distinction between the text written in one language and the translation of it into another. Regarding Scripture, they admit that only the original text in Greek and Hebrew was inspired (4) They implicitly approve all later revisions of their *own* work, because the very nature of Bible translation involves "a history of repeated revision and correction."

Sadly, many today who are "King James Only" advocates would deny all four of these points. Their only excuse for doing so is that they have never read the text of "The Translators to the Reader." But just a few years ago, that preface became available as a separate book, published by the American Bible Society. It includes both the old wording as well as an updated version, along with a full commentary.

Finally, in 1611, the Authorized Version was published.

How was it received? It may be surprising to us today to realize that there was by no means universal applause for this translation when it rolled off the presses. Some people, at first, criticized it for being *too simple*, too easy to understand! This was voiced especially by Roman Catholics. In anticipation of this criticism, the original preface argued that the translation intentionally "shunned the obscurity of the Papists..." The preface went on to denounce the Rheims-Douai version in these words:

[The Catholics have] the purpose to *darken* the sense, that [although] they must needs translate the Bible, yet by the language thereof it may be *kept from being understood*. But we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, ... that it may be understood even [by] the very vulgar."

We will come back to this issue later when we discuss problems with the KJV.

This new version was also criticized for its *inaccuracies*. The most outspoken critic was Dr. Hugh Broughton, a first-rate Hebrew scholar. Broughton, in fact, was eminently qualified to have been on the translation team, except for one thing: he was too cantankerous! As F. F. Bruce said, "he was not cut out for collaboration with others, and would have proved an impossible colleague. Probably he resented the fact that he was not

⁵³ Currently cited from Bruce, *History*, 101, but also available from ABS.

invited to serve, and when the new version appeared, he sent a critique of it to one of the king's attendants:

The late Bible... was sent to me to censure: which bred in me a sadness that will grieve me while I breathe, it is so ill done. Tell His Majesty that I had rather be rent in pieces with wild horses, than any such translation by my consent should be urged upon poor churches. ... The new edition crosseth me. I require it to be burnt.⁵⁴

Don't you love that? "Come on, Hugh! Don't pull any punches—Tell us what you *really* think!" The fundamental reason Broughton despised the KJV was that it looked too much like the Bishops' Bible and not enough like the Geneva.

Nevertheless, not all had this attitude. Although it would take fifty years for the KJV to overtake the Geneva in popularity, its intrinsic worth—the rhythm, the elegance, the phrases that lingered in one's mind—in due time "established itself [the King James] as the version for church and home, for public and private use, superseding the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible alike."⁵⁵

C. Editions

One of the ironic facts about the KJV is that it is *impossible* to honestly speak about the *first* printing, because there never really was a first printing! "The revision and correction process began immediately in 1611, ... even before the first printed edition was completed and put together. The pages of these two editions [the actual first edition and the corrected second edition]... seem to have been accidentally mixed before either was assembled and bound."⁵⁶

Thus, the first edition of the KJV is actually more of a first-and-second-edition hybrid. But there are ways to tell whether one possesses a 'first-second' edition or a completely second edition. I won't go into those details here. I have seen what is probably the finest example of the so-called 'first' edition of the KJV surviving today. It is part of a private collection in Texas.

Besides these two editions, the Authorized Version went through at least two more in the first year alone. In the first three years, it actually went through fourteen minor editions due to the frequent mistakes in the process of translating, revising, and printing. But these are not really revisions by today's standard. Two larger overhauls were completed in 1629 and 1638. Within fifty (50) years "the need was presented and an effort was made to officially revise [it once] again"—this time more thoroughly than the previous two revisions. But Parliament decided not to act on this impulse when Charles II ascended the throne in 1660. The shifts of the political winds thus stymied the third revision of the KJV. It would not undergo a major revision again for 100 years. In 1762 and 1769, the KJV was revised for a third and fourth time.

Altogether, nearly *100,000 changes* have been made to the 1611 KJV. The vast bulk of these are rather minor (mostly spelling and punctuation changes), but in the least this fact

⁵⁴ Bruce, *History*, 107.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁶ Minton, *Making*, 330. He adds some other fascinating information as well!

shows how *impossible* it is today for any church or any Christian to claim, “We read *only* the *original* 1611 King James Version of the Holy Bible”!

With all the revisions made to this translation over the centuries, printer’s errors were bound to creep in. Even though the goal was to eradicate all mistakes, *every* printing of the KJV added more!

For example, in 1611 the so-called ‘Judas Bible’ was printed: In Matt 26.36, the KJV says that *Judas* came with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane—even though *Judas* had already hanged himself in the previous chapter!

The very first edition of the Authorized Version is the ‘Basketball Bible’ because it speaks of ‘hoopes’ instead of ‘hookes’ used in the construction of the Tabernacle.

A 1716 edition has Jesus say in John 5.14 “sin *on* more” instead of “sin no more”!

The next year, the famous ‘Vinegar Bible’ appeared; this name was attached to this printing because the chapter title to Luke 20 was “The Parable of the Vinegar” instead of the “Parable of the Vineyard.”

In 1792, Philip, rather than Peter, denied his Lord three times in Luke 22.34.

Three years later the ‘Murderer’s Bible’ was printed: It was called this because in Mark 7.27 Jesus reportedly told the Syro-Phoenician woman, “Let the children first be *killed*” instead of “Let the children first be *filled*”!

In 1807 an Oxford edition has Heb 9.14 say, “Purge your conscience from *good* works” instead of “Purge your conscience from *dead* works.”

A printing of the KJV in 1964 said that women were to “adorn themselves in *modern* apparel” instead of “*modest* apparel” in 1 Tim 2.9.

But none of these printing mistakes can equal the Bibles of 1653 or 1631. These are the two ‘Evil Bibles’ of the King James history, for they both left out the word ‘**not**’ at key junctures. The 1653 edition—known as the ‘Unrighteous Bible’—said “the unrighteous shall inherit the kingdom of God” in 1 Cor 6.9. And the 1631 edition, the infamous ‘Wicked Bible,’ wrote the seventh of the ten commandments as “Thou shalt commit adultery”!

The Wicked Bible was such an embarrassment to the Anglican Church that the archbishop ordered the Bibles to be burned, and he fined the printer, Robert Barker, 300 pounds—no small sum in those days. Barker, who had been the king’s printer since the Authorized Version came out, died fourteen years later in debtor’s prison.

Not only have there been these occasional but bizarre printing mistakes, but several errors in the 1611 edition have *never* been changed. For example, in both Acts 7.45 and Heb 4.8 the name “Jesus” appears when *Joshua* is actually meant! Hebrews 4.8 in the Authorized Version says, “For if *Jesus* had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day.” The passage is saying that although *Joshua* brought his people into the promised land, he could not give them the eternal rest that they needed. But by having “Jesus” here, the KJV is thus saying that *Jesus* was inadequate, that he was not able to save his people from their sins. In Greek, both ‘Joshua’ and ‘Jesus’ are written the same way— Ἰησοῦς. The issue is not one of textual variant, but of inattention to the details of the interpretation of the text.

Or consider Matt 23.24 the Authorized Version reads, “Ye blind guides, which strain *at* a gnat, and swallow a camel.” The Greek text here means to “strain *out* a gnat”—not “*at* a gnat.” Jesus’ point is the same as what he says in Luke 6.41— “Why do you see the speck

in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" The religious leaders focused on the tiny problems of others without taking care of the big issues in their own lives.⁵⁷

Now, please understand: I am not listing these errors to make fun of the KJB! But I also don't want anyone to have the illusion that it is a perfect translation. No translation is perfect—not the KJV, not the RSV, not the NIV, not the NET Bible.

In fact, just to play fair, allow me to mention an error that made its way into the second printing of the NET Bible, New Testament, in 1998. This translation has more notes in it than any other Bible in history. There are half a million words of *notes* for the New Testament alone! And at one of them, the typist accidentally hit a second 's' when he wrote the conjunction 'as.' I won't spell it out for you, but you can well imagine the name this edition of the NET Bible would be called! Not only this, but as the senior New Testament editor of the NET Bible, I have to take full responsibility for this note. Besides, I was the one who actually typed in this word!

D. The KJV as Literature⁵⁸

In spite of all the printing problems of the KJV, it has endured the test of time. It has been called "the single greatest monument to the English language." Another scholar wrote, "The supremacy of the King James is one of style, not of scholarship. The men who made it did not set out to manufacture a literary classic—classics are seldom made to order. Yet they did produce one: perhaps the only classic ever turned in by a committee..."

Leland Ryken, professor of English literature at Wheaton College, speaks of the "overwhelming preference of people with literary stature in our century for the King James Bible over modern translations."⁵⁹

The linguist Mario Pei observed, "The King James Bible and Shakespeare together are responsible for well over half of all our language clichés and stock phrases."

H. L. Mencken, no friend of Christianity, declared that the KJV was "unquestionably the most beautiful book in the world."

I could quote from scores of other literary authors who embrace the Authorized Version like no other book in the world. What is it that makes the King James so good? In a word, it is its *elegance*.

The KJB has rhythm, balance, dignity, and force of style that is unparalleled in any other translation. Or, as Leland Ryken says, its touchstone is memorability. No translation today lingers in the mind like the King James of old does.

Frankly, it is my conviction that *every Christian should own a copy of the King James Bible*. It may not be the most accurate, but it *is* the most elegant. And you only deny your own rich literary and religious heritage if you do not own and *read* a King James Bible.

I wish to close this message today by reading 1 Cor 13 from the King James Bible.

⁵⁷ It is possible that 'strain at' in 1611 English meant 'strain out' (so OED). However, it was a rarer meaning even then and certainly should have been changed in subsequent revisions. Inexplicably, this error has remained in the text of most printings of the KJV. (See Minton, *Making*, 350, for exceptions.)

⁵⁸ The following quotations are taken from Leland Ryken's class notes on the KJV which he kindly sent to me in February 2001.

⁵⁹ p. 12.

1Cor. 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

1Cor. 13:2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

1Cor. 13:3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

1Cor. 13:4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

1Cor. 13:5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

1Cor. 13:6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

1Cor. 13:7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

1Cor. 13:8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

1Cor. 13:9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

1Cor. 13:10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

1Cor. 13:11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

1Cor. 13:12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

1Cor. 13:13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

The History of the English Bible

Part III:

From the KJV to the RV (from Elegance to Accuracy)

By
Daniel B. Wallace

March 21, 2001

Preface: This is the third part of a four-part lecture that was delivered at Lancaster Bible College in March, 2001, for the Staley Bible Lectureship. We are hoping to get permission to post all of the lectures as an audio tape on the Biblical Studies Foundation website. Here are some audio of a Textual Criticism series Dr. Wallace has done. Dr. Wallace is available as a conference speaker on “The History of the English Bible.” If your church is interested, contact him at wallace@bible.org for details.

The 270-Year Reign of the King

Although some folks think that the KJV had no rivals until 1881, this is not exactly true. After 1611, Bible translation continued to be quite vigorous.

- In 1703 Daniel Whitby did a paraphrase of the KJV.
- Edward Wells, in 1724, made a revision of the AV called *The Common Translation Corrected*.
- In 1729 Daniel Mace also did a corrected version of the KJV.
- William Whiston produced his *Primitive New Testament* in 1745, changing the KJV in light of more ancient Greek MSS. He followed the Western text, thus producing the *only* English NT ever to be based on the Western text.
- John Wesley made a translation in 1768.
- In the same year, Edward Harwood produced a quirky translation, in which the Lord’s Prayer did *not* begin, “Our Father, which art in heaven,” but instead it said this: “Thou great governour and *parent* of universal nature.” Apparently, this was the first gender-inclusive translation!
- The distinction of being the first *woman* to translate the Bible into English goes to Helen Spurrell, who in 1885 published a version of the Old Testament that was translated entirely from an unpointed Hebrew text—that is, a Hebrew Bible that only had consonants, no vowels.
- Countless others also produced translations. Charles Thompson, Samuel Sharpe, Isaac Leeser, A. Benisch, J. N. Darby, Robert Young, Joseph Bryant Rotherham, Thomas Newberry, W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, and Henry Alford all produced their own versions.
- But there was a common thread through *all* of these translations that kept them from overtaking the KJV: each version was produced by an *individual*, not by a

committee. Henry Alford, the Dean of Canterbury, published a revision of the AV in 1869. But he had no illusion that it would replace the KJ. His assessment of his own work reflects on the others as well:

“It is impossible,” Alford declared, “that *one man’s work* can ever fulfill the requisites for an accepted Version of the Scriptures.”

Alford in fact expressed hope that a Royal Commission would be appointed to revise the AV. Only a *year* after his translation appeared, the Convocation of Canterbury decided to start the ball rolling on a thorough revision of the KJV. Alford was a prophet! He was right on target on a short-range prophecy—so he passed the first test; let’s see how he did on a long-range prophecy...

Alford was not only concerned over the language of the KJV; he was also troubled by its inadequate textual base. He knew that the Greek text that stood behind the KJ was thoroughly inadequate (and we’ll talk about that later this hour). In anticipation of criticisms that would come from KJ advocates, he noted that many of these criticisms would be borne out of *ignorance*—from a *failure* to recognize that such changes were made “simply as an act of honest *obedience* to truth of testimony, or truth of rendering.”⁶⁰ Alford argued that “a translator of Holy Scripture must be... ready to sacrifice the choicest text, and the plainest proof of doctrine, if the words are not those of what he is constrained in his conscience to receive as God’s testimony.”

In this statement, Alford anticipated and answered the criticisms of King James Only folks for the next 130 years! I guess he really was a prophet!

But apart from revisions and translations done by individuals, no other English Bible appeared between 1611 and 1881. This raises a question: How did the King James stay on the throne for **270** years?

There are basically eight reasons why the AV (or Authorized Version, as it is called in England) went unchallenged so long.

1. Unlike the Geneva Bible, it was produced in England.
2. Unlike the Bishops’ Bible, it appeared in both folio size and quarto size. It could therefore compete with the Geneva in the home as well as in the church.
3. It was adopted and promoted by the Church—without the stigma of persecution (unlike the Geneva), and without the stigma of the poor literary quality of the Bishops’ Bible.
4. It did not have lots of marginal notes from a particular theological perspective—again unlike the Geneva.
5. It involved 47 scholars, an obviously impressive number that, in itself, would persuade many to use this version.⁶¹ The Bishops’ Bible had been translated by nine men; the Geneva by a small committee as well.

⁶⁰ As quoted in Bruce, *History*, 131.

⁶¹ This is analogous to what is often done in scholarship. Once a large group of scholars produces a work, competing texts lose ground simply because they are perceived to have been in a less careful manner. Robert Funk, the chairman of the Jesus Seminar (an 84-member team of mostly liberal scholars which produced *The Five Gospels* [a work in which the words of Jesus are color-coded as to their authenticity—e.g., red means that he really said it, black means that he really did not, etc.]) once told me that he likes big productions of this sort because opponents cannot easily come up with the resources to produce a counter-

6. It was excellent English (unlike the Bishops’), and was more lyrical and rhythmic than even the Geneva.
7. It was a *compromise* translation between various factions within England—including High Churchmen and Puritans, and to a degree, between Protestants and Catholics. Even though it was ostensibly based on the Bishops’ Bible (to satisfy the High Churchmen), it really looked a lot more like the Geneva, and even borrowed from the Rheims-Douai. So everybody had *something* to like about the AV!
8. Finally, it had the financial and political backing of the throne.
Essentially, the KJV stayed in power because of the mixture of *political clout*, *religious compromise*, and *literary power*. And that’s a threefold cord that’s not easily broken.

All this contributed to the longevity of the AV. But even with all this, it could not sit on the throne forever.

Problems with the King James Version

Two fundamental problems with the King James Bible began to surface in the decades following its publication—problems of *text* and problems of *translation*. And there is a third problem, not really related to the King James directly, but rather related to the *perception* of the King James Bible by its advocates—the problem of *tradition*.

1. Text

First, problems with the text.

The Greek text used by these editors was vastly inferior to that of modern translations. It was principally the Stephanus text of 1550 (third edition), which, in turn, relied essentially on Erasmus’ third edition of 1522. The Stephanus text was modified slightly by Theodore Beza who took the text through eleven editions.⁶² Beza’s 9th edition was used in preparation for the KJV. This Greek text, later known as the *Textus Receptus* (TR), misses the wording of the original New Testament in about **5000** places. Most of these places cannot be translated, but a few of them are fairly substantial. Once again, *all* of these Greek texts—from Erasmus to Beza—are essentially the same. They are all essentially the third edition of Erasmus.

To understand the history of the English Bible you have to know a little about the Greek text that stands behind it. Here are some of the facts about Erasmus’ Greek text.

1. With the invention of the printing press and with Greek learning returning to Europe, there was a felt need for the first Greek NT. The rush was on! And the first one done would almost certainly be a *sloppy* production.
2. The Roman Catholic priest and Dutch humanist, Erasmus, met the challenge. On **March 1, 1516** he published the first GNT. Exactly *20 months later* the Reformation would begin because Luther had read Erasmus’ Greek text. And

view with a great number of scholars on their side. The issue was more logistical than scholarly, but there is an illusion of legitimacy simply by the sheer numbers.

⁶² Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, says that Beza had ten editions. But I have personally seen one that is dated before his alleged first one (1564 was the year of the latter, if I recall).

when he read *Romans* in Greek for the first time, he was converted to Christ. In a very real sense, the Reformation began because of the *Greek* NT. Luther himself said that he *never* would have challenged the Pope without first reading the Greek NT.

Sidenote: I know we are studying the *English* Bible and how important it is for our faith. But I want to turn right now and speak to the future pastors, the future Bible translators, the future theologians and apologists in this room. For you, the Greek NT and Hebrew OT are even *more* important than the English Bible. *All* of the Reformers—from Luther to Calvin, from Zwingli to Melanchthon—insisted on *two* fundamentals for any who would become pastors. First, they had to hold to the right doctrines—*sola scriptura, sola fidei, sola gratia*. But second, they *had* to learn Greek and Hebrew. This was *not an option* for any ministers of the Word.

The battle cry of the Reformation was *ad fontes*—“back to the sources!” This meant back to the *original* text. For too long the Church had been enslaved to tradition and to biblical interpretation that was *given* to it by others. The only way to get past tradition, and to test anyone’s interpretation of the Bible was *to know the original languages*.

Today, the learning of Greek and Hebrew are often regarded as non-essentials for Christian ministers. “It’s too hard.” “Just use the commentaries.” “Ministry is about people, not about the text.” I’ve heard all these excuses for years. It’s nothing new. The same excuses were used in the sixteenth century.

Luther went into a strong diatribe against those pastors-in-training who resisted learning the biblical languages. And characteristically, he didn’t mince words. What he had to say then is still valid today. Listen to Luther:

In proportion as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the [biblical] languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages *alone*—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his word, then we too ought to honor them above all others.

If through our neglect we let the languages go (God forbid!), we shall lose the *gospel* too. It is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish.

When our faith is held up to ridicule, where does the fault lie? It lies in our ignorance of the languages; and there is no way out than to learn the languages. It is also a stupid undertaking to attempt to gain an understanding of Scripture by laboring through the commentaries of the fathers and a multitude of books and glosses. Instead of this, men should have devoted themselves to the languages.

Since it becomes Christians then to make good use of the Holy Scriptures as their one and only book and it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God, it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study [the biblical] languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be an open book. How sternly God will judge our lethargy and ingratitude [if we do not learn Greek and Hebrew]!

It's almost as if Luther had been sitting in on faculty discussions at *half* of our seminaries in this country! If you plan to go into the pastorate, I urge you to consider a seminary that has an unswerving commitment to the biblical languages. It is not *all* you need, but it is something that you cannot do without. One of the significant and terribly sad historical notes here is this: virtually every evangelical seminary that abandoned the study of the original languages has become unorthodox within fifty years.

Back to Erasmus:

3. Erasmus took his Greek text through five editions. All of them were Latin-Greek diglots, never Greek alone. The reason? Erasmus' motive was not primarily to produce a Greek NT, but rather to prove that his Latin translation was an improvement over Jerome's Vulgate (done 1000 years earlier). The Vulgate had been the authorized Bible of the western Church ever since its production.
4. Because he was in a rush, he could find only one copy of the book of **Revelation**. And that copy lacked the last leaf, Rev 22.16-21. What was Erasmus to do? He decided to *backtranslate* those final six verses, from Latin into Greek. And as good as Erasmus' Greek was (he was considered the premier Greek scholar of the sixteenth century), he still created *seventeen* (17) variant readings that have not been found in any Greek New Testament MSS (except, of course, for one that was a copy of Erasmus' printed text). The most remarkable text is **Rev 22.19**: "And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the *tree* of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."

But Erasmus' text had 'book' instead of 'tree' because the Latin had 'book' here: "God will take away from him his share in the *book* of life." Erasmus' text was thus quite defective here. The reason that some Latin MSS had 'book' here was no doubt due to the fact that the Latin scribes saw 'book' twice in this verse and they accidentally replaced 'tree' with 'book' in the middle of the verse. This could easily happen in Latin because the words were similar (unlike Greek, which has ξύλον for 'tree' and βιβλίον for 'book'): the Latin word for tree is *ligno* and the word for book is *libro*. Thus, a two letter difference between these two words. The KJV repeated this error, giving rise to the possibility that the Bible teaches that one can lose his salvation (since removal from the book of life would be tantamount to loss of salvation).

5. MS basis: about half a dozen, none earlier than 10th to 12th century. Today we have 5600 MSS, with some as early as 2nd century.
6. The 1516 edition was called by one scholar the 'most poorly edited book in the world.' Erasmus himself admitted that it was pasted together rather than edited.
7. The response to Erasmus' efforts was not altogether positive. The Roman Catholic hierarchy complained that the *Comma Johanneum* of 1 John 5.7-8 (see below) was not in Erasmus' text and thus his text must surely be defective. But Erasmus responded in the *Annotationes* of his second edition (1519) that he did

not put in the famous text about the Trinity because he did not find it in any Greek MSS.⁶³

Erasmus' text read as follows: "There are three who bear witness—the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree."

Latin Vulgate (late copies): For there are three who bear witness in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three who bear witness on earth—the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree."

But these words of the Latin Vulgate were not found in any Greek MS until one was 'made to order' for Erasmus (who implied that he would not publish a NT with such words unless he could find them in a Greek text) in 1520 by a scribe named Roy, working in Oxford. It somehow was 'discovered' before Erasmus published his third edition.⁶⁴

8. In the 3rd edition of 1522, the Trinitarian formula of the late Latin Vulgate MSS was added. To date, only *four* Greek MSS are known to have this reading (all from the sixteenth century or *later*) and four others have marginal readings to this effect.⁶⁵ The source of the wording has been traced to a homily on the passage, written in the eighth century, in a *Latin* allegorical commentary on this text.

I would *love* for this verse to be in the original! But the doctrine of the Trinity does not live or die with 1 John 5.7! You recall that I quoted from Henry Alford earlier about his obedience to the truth of the evidence for the sake of Christ. He said: "a translator of Holy Scripture must be... ready to sacrifice the choicest text, and the plainest proof of doctrine, if the words are not those of what he is constrained in his conscience to receive as God's testimony." Alford was speaking of 1 John 5.7. He believed very strongly in the Trinity, but knew that the Trinitarian statement in the KJV *here* was added later. (The fact that these words were *never* used in argument with Arians in the early centuries of the Greek church shows that they must surely have been added later, and from the Latin tradition.)

Summary: This is Erasmus' text: Half a dozen MSS, sloppily edited, six verses back-translated from Latin with no Greek support, and some verses added because of pressure from the Catholic church. It misses the original wording in about 5000 places. This is the Greek text of Erasmus; this is the Greek text that the KJ NT is based on.

There has been much emotional baggage attached to the verses in the KJV, both because of the cadence and lyrical quality of some of those verses (though often at the

⁶³ It is sometimes asserted that Erasmus rashly promised that if a Greek MS were found that had this text in it, he would publish the wording in his Greek NT. But that is an overstatement. Erasmus only made the negative statement that he did not put it in because it was not found in any Greek MSS. One may well detect a veiled promise in this statement, but it is not explicit.

⁶⁴ This MS is the famous Codex 61, and is now housed in Dublin, Ireland. The *Comma Johanneum* has been consulted so frequently that the book almost of its own falls open to this page!

⁶⁵ Although the MSS which have this marginal reading date from as early as the 12th century, the marginal reading in each case can not be dated any earlier than the 15th or 16th century.

expense of an accurate translation⁶⁶) and because of later additions made to the text as it was transmitted in the Greek and Latin traditions. Ultimately, what is needed of all Christians is a hunger for the *truth*. It is not that we have too little of the Bible (as KJ advocates argue), but that they have too much. Their Bible is 110% of the Word of God! Modern translations are often condemned for taking away from the words of Scripture, when in reality the KJV falls under the flip-side criticism of *adding* to the words of Scripture. Our goal should be to burn off the dross to get to the gold.

2. Translation

There were also problems in translation.

The 47 scholars who worked on the KJV knew Latin better than they knew Greek or Hebrew. Hence, it should not surprise us that they committed hundreds of errors in translation, especially in relation to the definite article (since Latin does not have one and Greek does). For example:

John 4.27 (“Jesus was speaking with *the* woman”). The point of the text is not that Jesus was speaking with *the* woman, but that he was speaking with *a* woman. First century Jewish law forbade a rabbi from speaking to a woman in public; he would even have to refrain from speaking to his own mother in public! Jesus, of course, did not follow such arbitrary rules, but his new disciples were unaware of this fact. The whole point of the narrative at this stage is not the *kind* of woman that Jesus was speaking to, but simply that he was speaking to *a* woman. Her nature as the “town naughty lady” would soon enough be revealed to the disciples.

1 Tim 2.12 (“I do not permit a woman to *usurp* authority over a man”). Many a woman preacher has said, “I am not usurping any man’s authority; the authority to preach to you today has been granted to me by the elders of this church.” That is an understanding of 1 Tim 2.12 that is based on the KJV, not modern translations. Where did the KJV get that notion? Not from Tyndale, since he translated this verse as follows: “I suffer not a woman to teach, neither to *have authority* over a man: but for [her] to be in silence.” The KJV here has “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to *usurp* authority over the man, but to be in silence.” The key difference is in the translation of ἀϋθεντεῖν. Tyndale renders it “have authority,” while the KJV renders it “usurp authority.” From what I can gather, the verb did not bear the force of “usurp” until Chrysostom (fourth century AD) gave it that spin in his comments on this text. Further, “usurp” was not the *predominant* meaning of ἀϋθεντέω until the ninth century A.D. But since the word occurs less than 125 times in all of Greek literature (according to a search of the *TLG* database of 64 million words from Homer to A.D. 1453), the KJV translators were at a loss. Hence, they relied on Erasmus’ Latin (which, you may recall, he put forth as a correction of Jerome’s) of *usurpare*. Now the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* gives as the first definition of this term, “To take

⁶⁶ The beauty of the KJV is addressed in lecture two in this series. It should be mentioned here that, contrary to what many have said, I strongly advocate the KJV and recommend it to *every* native English speaker. Every native English-speaking Christian should own a KJV as well as two or three other Bibles.

possession of (property) on one's own initiative (and without strict legal claim)." Jerome's translation, incidentally, was *dominare* (*OLD* gives as its first definition of this verb, "To exercise sovereignty, act as a despot, rule"). Thus, *Tyndale's* translation was more accurate to the Greek than either Jerome's or Erasmus' (though Jerome's was fairly literal, since there is no verb in Latin that is a cognate to either *potestas* or *auctoris*. Thus, if a verb has to be used, *dominare* is the most neutral term available and therefore the most accurate.) But the KJV translators knew Latin better than they knew Greek, so when it came to this verb they relied on Erasmus' erroneous Latin translation rather than the true meaning of the Greek, thereby spawning generations of faulty interpretations on the role of women in ministry. And where did Erasmus get this notion? He was a Roman Catholic priest: he read the patristic writers. In fact, he knew them as well as he knew the scriptures.

It is a remarkable thing that many today read this text as though the KJV was the accurate rendering. But most modern translations render the term neutrally (cf., e.g., RSV, NKJV, NIV ["have authority"], RV, ASV ["have dominion"], NASB ["exercise authority"], etc. Remarkably, even the NRSV, with its strong bent toward inclusive language and egalitarianism [as in 1 Tim 3:2: "married only once" for "husband of one wife"] here reads "have authority").

Titus 2.13: KJV reads: "the glorious appearing of the great God and *our* Saviour, Jesus Christ." But this text employs a construction that can only mean that "God" and "Savior" refer to one person; it is one of the clearest texts in the NT affirming the deity of Christ. The KJV does not affirm this here. In 1798 the lay scholar Granville Sharp wrote a treatise in which he advocated a new translation of the Bible since the "common version" (the KJV) had incorrectly rendered the Greek here, as well as in 2 Peter 1.1. The point we wish to make here is *not* that the KJV is unorthodox on the deity of Christ! Rather, it is that in many places it misses the point of the Greek text because the translators were more at home in Latin than in Greek. Although some KJV Only advocates have quite unfairly charged modern translations with denying the deity of Christ because in a few verses such is not clearly affirmed (e.g., 1 Tim 3.16), frequency of prooftexts is not the same as affirmation vs. denial of doctrine. If one translation affirms the deity of Christ 300 times and another only 295 times, there can be no real charge of unorthodoxy in either case. Further, several studies have shown that modern translations have *more* evidence of the deity of Christ than the KJV does—yet no one is charging the KJV translators with unorthodoxy on this matter, nor should they. No cardinal doctrine depends on a single or even a few verses.

Not only are there hundreds of mistranslations, but also hundreds of archaisms or antiquated expressions in the AV. Many words were already archaic when the KJV came out. But by 1881, over **300** words in the AV had changed their meaning. "Suffer the little children to come unto me" does *not* mean "beat your kids so that they'll go to church"!

I often ask KJ advocates which dictionary they use to help them understand the Bible. If they use a modern dictionary to understand 1611 English, it simply won't do. More sophisticated KJV advocates say, "The 1828 Webster." That's better, but still not good enough. 1828 is still closer to 2001 than it is to 1611.

Frankly, there is only *one* dictionary that you really can use to understand every word in the KJV: the **13-volume unabridged Oxford English Dictionary**. For each entry, it traces the history of the word's usage.⁶⁷ To take but one example: 2 Tim 2.15:

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (KJV)

All modern translations have something like "*Be eager* to show yourself approved" or "*Be diligent* to show yourself approved" rather than "Study to show yourself approved."

This is not a mistake by the KJ translators. They translated this correctly, because in 1611 English "study" meant "be eager," or "be diligent." But who would know today that 'study' in 1611 meant 'be diligent' *unless they consulted the Oxford English Dictionary?* My recommendation to KJV users—to better understand their preferred Bible—is to do two things: (1) Use the *OED* liberally as they study their Bible, and (2) get a New King James Bible to help them in the hard places. Nevertheless, one has to understand that the great value of the KJV today is the heritage of the English language and the beauty of this Bible. But as a study Bible, or one that is as accurate as can be, the King James comes up short.

3. Tradition

Finally, there is the problem of the *perception* of the KJB by its advocates. They often believe that it is perfect, and the *only* Bible that can properly be called 'the Holy Bible.'

In this section, I will actually be defending the KJV *against* its modern-day proponents. It is *not* a member of the Trinity! The danger one has in putting it on a pedestal is that for many people, once it gets knocked off that pedestal, it is viewed less positively than it should be. We should have a very positive assessment of the KJV without elevating it to inspired status.

Sometimes this KJ Only attitude goes beyond all logic and dabbles in the realm of the absurd. In 1995 I was on the John Ankerberg show called, "What's the Best Bible Translation?" There were three KJV advocates. Early on in the eight-part program (that was filmed all in one day) John Ankerberg asked them, "If a person in Russia becomes a Christian, are you saying that he would need to learn English in order to read the only true Holy Bible?" After a brief pause, the lead KJV advocate said, "Yes!" I wondered why I had been asked to be on the show after hearing that response...

⁶⁷ There is available also a very helpful book that gives a glossary of all the unintelligible terms in the KJV: Melvin E. Elliott, *The Language of the King James Bible: A Glossary Explaining its Words and Expressions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). This book has nearly 2000 entries. Such common words as study, prove, steel, song, substance, translate, yield, liquor, superstitious, and traffic meant something quite different in 1611 English than they do today. Even *a*, *the*, and *of* did not always carry the same meaning as today! This book, along with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, are indispensable tools for studying the KJV.

Not all KJV advocates employ such illogic however. Here are some of the basic arguments that KJV advocates use for this Bible's status as the only Holy Bible, with a brief response:

1. It is perfect. The translators were the best ever, the most godly men. **But** even the translators explicitly denied that the KJV was perfect in the original preface (which, unfortunately, is now no longer printed with the KJV Bible). They said, "perfection is never attainable by man." They themselves said that only the original was inspired, that *no* translation was perfect or ever could be.
2. All modern translations cause chaos because they are so different. If we all used the KJ, there would be no uncertainty about the wording of the text. There is no uncertainty anywhere. **But** this ignores the fact that original 1611 KJV had 8500 marginal readings, many of which expressed doubt about the meaning or wording of the text. On numerous occasions, they simply had to 'flip a coin' and put something in the text! The translators were humble men, who wanted to alert the reader when they just weren't sure what the Hebrew or Greek text meant. It is only the omission of these marginal readings that has given some folks the *illusion of certainty*.
3. No modern translation deserves the name, "Holy Bible." **But** this is not the attitude of the KJ translators themselves. They said, "the word of God may be recognized in the very meanest translation of the Bible." This would include the translations that came before them *and* the ones that came after.
4. God has used the KJV for 270 years. No other translation has stood the test of time. No other translation has sold as many copies. This proves that it is the one and only inspired Word of God. **But** this is not true. The Latin Vulgate was the official Bible of western Europe for over 1000 years—four *times* as long as the KJV was on the throne! And the NIV has actually *outsold* the KJV—and it did it in one-tenth the time. Frankly, this attitude is remarkably similar to the attitude that virtually every generation of Christians has had when confronted by a new translation that challenges their 'old favorite.' It represents emotional baggage rather than clear thinking. This attitude of resistance to new translations was seen when Jerome produced the Latin Vulgate, when Erasmus 'corrected' the Latin Vulgate, and even when the King James Bible was produced! Those who know history know that it is the attitude of the ignorant. And as much as we must truly love these folks, it is also important that we help them love and learn truth. The incarnation of Christ demands no less of us.
5. The language is exalted, elegant, beautiful. This Bible was written in the golden age of the English language—when English was correctly and properly spoken. This is the language that the Bible deserves to be in—Elizabethan English.

But the *real* language of the Bible was of a different sort. It was the conversational Greek of the day—the Greek that men on the streets of Athens and Antioch, Jerusalem and Corinth, spoke. In fact, it was known as the '*common* Greek,' and it was a big step down from the golden age of Greek literature, the classical Greek era that ended 400 years earlier. And although there were artificial and pompous attempts in the first century AD to revive this classical Greek, *none of the NT writers* got sucked into this mode of writing. Their writing was clear, and simple, and connected to real people—not artificial and pompous.

And the KJ translators explicitly tried to capture that. Their goal, in fact, was to make the text as plain and simple to understand as possible. They said (in the original preface):

[The Catholics have] the purpose to *darken* the sense, that [although] they must needs translate the Bible, yet by the language thereof it may be *kept from being understood*. But we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself ... that it may be understood even [by] the very vulgar.”

It is a great irony that today part of the reason the KJB is so revered is because it sounds so archaic, so other-worldly. It is the Bible that speaks in a stained-glass voice. But this is *precisely* what the KJ translators *condemned* in a translation! Their intention—which they accomplished for *their* day 400 years ago—was to make the Bible clear, simple, easy to understand.

All of these arguments have nothing to do with our Protestant heritage. Instead, KJ Only advocates unwittingly look more like Roman Catholics than Protestants. (And Roman Catholics of yesteryear, for nowadays many Catholics are embracing the need to learn the Bible, and the study the original languages.)

As you recall, Protestantism was begun when the Word of God became accessible to the people. Now, the KJV has become to today’s layman what the Latin Vulgate was to yesterday’s layman. Further, since people cling to it because it is traditional, they unwittingly embrace another Roman Catholic notion (tradition over Scripture). Thus, in two major respects (clarity vs. obscurity in understanding, and Scripture vs. tradition), those who cling to the KJV resemble (older) Roman Catholicism against the rest of Protestantism!

To sum up: There are two attitudes to avoid in dealing with the KJB. (1) We must not be so reactionary to KJ Only advocates that we *despise* the KJB! From time to time, I put an essay or two on the internet. Sometimes I discuss Bible translations. Inevitably, I tick someone off, usually someone from the KJ Only crowd. In fact, I average one or two emails a month in which I am condemned to hell! This happens to every Bible translator. Dr. Bruce Metzger got a letter one time from a New York cab driver which said, “I hate what you have done to the Bible! If you ever come to NYC, I will run you over with my cab, and then I will back up and do it again.” The letter ended with, “In Christian love” followed by the man’s name!

This kind of attitude still does not give me the right to become sour on the KJB.

If you’ve got family or friends who are *rabidly* loyal to the KJV, the danger you have is arrogance and apathy. You might be thinking, “Aha! Now, I’ve got some arguments to use against my uncle Howard! Let’s see what he says to *this!*” But I urge you: don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater! If the AV is not all it’s cracked up to be, that doesn’t give you the right to neglect the Scriptures. And even though the Bible is not a member of the Trinity, the *only* way we can know God is by knowing his Word.

The Age of Discovery, the Age of Reason

What is it that finally overthrew the reign of the King James? It was essentially the discovery of new MSS. The KJ was based on half a dozen Greek MSS, no earlier than the tenth century AD. Today, we know of **5,600** Greek MSS—and some of them are as early as the *second century AD*.

I won't rehearse the details of these discoveries with you, because we're out of time. But by 1881 the English-speaking world was ready for a new translation, one that was based on the oldest possible MSS. In that year, the Revised Version was born.

The Birth of the Revised Version (1881, 1885)

1. A Revision of the Authorized Version

The Revised Version was a *revision* of the KJV. It was consciously intended to be in line with the KJV—that is, a major revision, but based on the best and earliest MSS. It was thus the *fifth* major revision of the AV.

2. Nature of the Translation

This new translation was heralded as a very accurate translation. It was a *good* translation in representing the meaning of the original. But it was often too stilted; not the best English. Produced in England, though with significant input from American scholars. However, many of the Americans' suggestions went unheeded.

3. Reception

You've all heard the old line, "Something is lost in the translation." That is always the case. There is never exact correspondence in wording, structure, literary power, cadence, and emotive impact between two languages. *What the KJV sacrificed was accuracy; what the RV sacrificed was beauty.*

The problem is, even if a translation is accurate, if it doesn't get read it won't have an impact on people's lives. An old Italian proverb suggests the more beautiful the translation, the less faithful; the uglier the translation, the more faithful it must be.

The KJV is the beautiful and graceful matron of the family who gave birth to a homely daughter that kept pointing out her mother's faults! And even though the RV launched a new era—the era of accuracy—the RV was a dismal failure. No one wanted to read it. The KJ was still safe on the throne for another 20 years, but the seeds of revolt had been planted. We can be grateful to God that we live at a time when there is an abundance of excellent translations. We don't have to choose between an elegant translation that misses the mark and an accurate one that's ugly. Tomorrow, we will see what our choices really are.

Enable us, Father, to love this book, to study this book, to read it, search it, embrace it. Forgive us for our apathy and our laziness. Give us a passion to *know your Word*, Lord, that we might know *you*.

The History of the English Bible

Part IV: Why So Many Versions?

Daniel B. Wallace, Ph.D.

March 19-21, 2001

Editor's note: This is the fourth part of a four-part series of lectures that were delivered at Lancaster Bible College in March, 2001, for the Staley Bible Lectureship. Dr. Wallace is available as a conference speaker on "The History of the English Bible." If your church is interested, contact him for details.

Preface: Two Great Periods of Bible Translation

There have been two great periods of English Bible translation in history—the sixteenth century and the twentieth century. In many respects, they are mirror images of each other. Each began with a certain kind of translation that was then followed for many generations. The Tyndale was the template for almost all 16th century Bibles; the RV set the pattern for most modern translations.

In the sixteenth century, the predominant concern in Bible translation was *beauty*; in the twentieth century, it was *truth*. No single translation at any time has captured all that the original text has to offer.

Not only this, but none of the Bible translations were produced in a vacuum. There were political and religious groups behind the scenes that were driving much of the production.

And *this* is why there is no simple answer to the question, "What's the *best* translation available today?" No translation can capture the full force of the original. The best we can do is to own several different *kinds* of translations. You may need one for serious study, another for casual reading, and another for memorizing. But don't shortchange yourself by thinking that *one* Bible is all you need. The *only* Bible that can make that claim is the Greek and Hebrew Bible.

This hour, we will discuss the various kinds of translations and, hopefully, help you to understand the nature of some of the more popular Bibles available today.

A. The Era of Accuracy (or 'formal equivalence') (1881-1971)

1. The Revised Version (1881, 1885)

As we noted yesterday, when the RV appeared, it was meant to be a revision of the KJV. It was even touted as "the triumph of King Truth over King James." But the scholars who produced it were far more interested in a *literal* translation than in a *beautiful* translation.

In spite of all the scholarly clamor for this new translation, most people—including clergy—still preferred the King James.

2. The American Standard Version (1901)

- The RV was primarily a British effort, but there were a few Americans who worked on the translation. By contractual agreement, the Americans promised not to publish their own translation until the RV had been on the market at least fourteen years. This would give the RV time to become established and overtake the KJ. As it turned out, 14 years or 140 years would still *not* be enough time for this stiff British translation to displace the AV.
- The ASV was significantly better English than the RV. But it was still quite stilted. It is the most literal translation ever done in English that qualifies as *passable* English.
- Like the RV, this translation was a revision of the KJ—the *sixth* revision.
- The ASV was immediately recognized as vastly superior to the RV. It became a great study Bible, though it is now outdated by new discoveries.

3. The Revised Standard Version (1946, 1952)

Nearly fifty years passed before the next major translation was done. The impoverished style of the ASV prompted the International Council of Religious Education to recommend a revision. The work began in 1937 and the committee of 32 scholars consciously tried to make the RSV preserve the qualities of the KJV that had made it so great.

The RSV is a product of American scholarship. It is very much in the spirit of the KJV, and should be regarded as the *seventh* revision of the KJV.

On the first day of publication—September 30, 1952—it sold one *million* copies. Among many churches in America, it quickly replaced the AV. It is still one of the most popular translations ever done. It is powerful in its simplicity and directness. The conservative NT scholar, F. F. Bruce, gives it high praise:

... for the English-speaking world as a whole there is no modern version of the Bible which comes so near as the R.S.V. does to making the all-purpose provision which the A.V. made for so many years.⁶⁸

But not everyone took a liking to the RSV. It is in fact the most *hated* English translation of all time.

The first half of the 20th century saw two new major translations—the ASV and the RSV. But the second half of the 20th has seen a multitude of new translations. Why the change? What was the catalyst that spawned all these new versions? It was primarily the RSV—and fundamentally it was a *negative reaction* to the RSV.

Once again, we cannot understand Bible translations unless we put them in their historical context. When the RSV was produced, there was a distinctive religious and political climate. On the religious front, we were embroiled in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. This reached its apex in the 1925 Scopes Monkey trial when a high school biology teacher was put on trial in Tennessee for teaching Darwinian evolution in the classroom!

⁶⁸ Bruce, *History*, 203.

And on the political front, immediately after World War II the Cold War with Communism commenced. This was the era of Senator McCarthy who smelled a communist under every rock.

It should not surprise us that the strongest attacks on the RSV came from the religious and political conservatives.

Senator McCarthy condemned this new translation as communist propaganda. His sole basis was that the RSV used the word “comrade” in three verses. And since the communists referred to themselves as “comrades,” McCarthy surmised that the RSV was the result of a communist plot!

Remarkably, he was successful in persuading some members of the military of his logic. The RSV was banned for use in the Air Force for several years.

But by far the deepest criticisms of the RSV came from religious fundamentalists. The RSV was sponsored by the National Council of Churches. This is a large group embodying several denominations, but very few fundamentalist churches were included. The doctrinal commitments of the NCC had some modernist leanings to them. So, when the RSV appeared, there was an instant suspicion on the part of some fundamentalists.

And they didn’t have to look too far to find ground for their suspicions. **Isaiah 7.14** became the lightning rod that attracted their thunderbolt of criticism. In the KJV this verse said, “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a *virgin* shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” This famous passage is quoted in Matthew 1.23 where Matthew uses it as proof of the virgin birth of Christ.

In the RSV, Isaiah 7.14 was a *little* different: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a *young woman* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

There was an immediate reaction. Scores of pamphlets appeared with such titles as *The Bible of Antichrist, The New Blasphemous Bible, and Whose Unclean Fingers Have Been Tampering With the Holy Bible—God’s Pure, Infallible, Verbally Inspired Word?*

Several fundamentalist preachers publicly burned the RSV. One of them took a blowtorch and in front of his congregation tried to light it on fire. When he had trouble getting it lit, he remarked that it was just like the devil because it was so hard to burn!

Another preacher sent the ashes of the RSV to the senior editor.

1983—I had the opportunity to visit Dr. Bruce Metzger of Princeton Seminary. . . . While there, he showed me an urn full of ashes. I didn’t know what had been burned, but at first I thought this was a bizarre thing to show a guest. He said, “These are the ashes of the Revised Standard Version Bible.” Dr. Metzger had inherited the ashes from the previous senior editor. He quipped, “I am grateful to be a Bible translator in the 20th century. Nowadays, they only burn the translations rather than the translators!” But he quickly added that it was a terrible shame that people would treat the Word of God the way this preacher did.

Isaiah 7.14 in the RSV became the most divisive verse in 20th century translations. This text was a watershed for orthodoxy. The Hebrew word that the RSV translated as ‘young woman’ and that the KJV had translated as virgin was the word **ALMAH**. The debates

raged so much in the churches across America that one observer noted that **ALMAH** had become the most recognized Hebrew word in the country!

The conservative reaction to the RSV's translation of this *one word* gave birth to the NASB, the NIV, and a host of other translations.

But just like the reactions to *every* new Bible translation that has ever come down the pike, the criticisms are often generated more by emotions than by evidence. Recall the words of the 19th century conservative Christian scholar, Henry Alford: "a translator of Holy Scripture must be... ready to sacrifice the choicest text, and the plainest proof of doctrine, if the words are not those of what he is constrained in his conscience to receive as God's testimony."

This is precisely what the RSV translators did. The Hebrew word **almah** means 'young woman'; it does not mean 'virgin.' But when it came to Matt 1.23, where Isa 7.14 is quoted, the RSV translators have 'virgin' because this is what the *Greek* word means. They are not denying the virgin birth of Christ; they are simply being honest with the Greek and Hebrew texts.

Nevertheless, not all conservative scholars saw it this way.

4. The New American Standard Bible (1963, 1971; revised 1995)

The first major reaction to the RSV was the NASB. It was produced by the Lockman Foundation in La Habra, CA—a theologically conservative organization. The names of the translators were kept secret. But many of them, if not most, were Talbot and Dallas Seminary professors.

- Revision of the ASV, not of the RSV.
- Literal translation, very popular among conservative pastors, but not so popular in the pew. More literal than RSV, but also less readable. Many times it is simply Greek put in English dress.
- "If the R.S.V. had never appeared, this revision of the A.S.V. would be a more valuable work than it is. As things are, there are few things done well by the N.A.S.B. which are not done better by the R.S.V."⁶⁹
- One of the things it does better, however, is that it is a better study Bible than the RSV.
- Still, it has curiously antiquated features—features that trace their roots in the Geneva Bible—such as *indenting each verse* and using *italics* for words that are not in the original.
- Sometimes, the translators are too rigid in their understanding of Greek and Hebrew. For example, they often translate the Greek perfect as though it were an English perfect. But the two do not mean the same thing. The Greek perfect should often be translated like an English present tense. In Eph 2.8, for example, the KJV has 'for by grace ye are saved' while the NASB has 'for by grace you have been saved.' But 'you have been saved' in English offers no comfort to the present time since it says nothing about the continuation of salvation. The Greek perfect actually has the force of both: you have been saved in the past and you are

⁶⁹ Ibid., 259.

still saved. In this instance, the KJV translators did a better job than the NASB largely because they understood English better than the NASB translators. Further, one of my professors, S. Lewis Johnson, once commented in class that the NASB was wrong in some verse in Revelation. I don't recall which one. But he went on to say, "That's because the person who translated Revelation was dozing in class when I taught him that text!" Dr. Johnson stands, to a large degree, behind much of the NASB New Testament, though without wanting to take credit for much.

B. The Era of Readability (or 'functional equivalence') (1970-1998)

Even before the NASB appeared, there was already an increasing restlessness about the nature of translation. In Great Britain, because of the disastrous response to the RV, biblical scholars decided that they could no longer patch up the KJV. Something entirely different needed to be done.

In America, there was an equal reaction to the RSV—both because of Isa 7.14 and because of the style of translation the RSV was.

The NEB and NIV would be born as a result. What marks both of these translations out is that they are the *first* major translations done by Protestants that are completely new works. Neither one is in the Tyndale—King James lineage. Neither one is a literal or formal equivalent translation. Both of them represented a new school of thought about Bible translation.

The older school said that all translation needs to be as literal as possible, or word-for-word. This is called **formal equivalent**. But that is not always possible. Idioms in one language do not always transfer over into another.

E.g., the Greek expression that a woman is pregnant is literally, "she is *having it* in the belly." When the OT speaks of God's anger, it says, "God's nostrils are enlarged."

Further, a major problem with formal equivalence is that although it may work on a cognitive level, it often fails on an emotional level. The goal of a translator is not only to reproduce the *message* of the original, but also to reproduce the *impact* of that original message. This requires another approach.

The newer school of translation argues for **dynamic equivalence**. This is more phrase-for-phrase translation. It is more interpretive.

1. The New English Bible (1970; revised 1989)

The first completely new English Bible since Tyndale was the NEB. It was conceived in 1946, but not completed until 1970. Done by British scholars; perhaps an overreaction to the dismal failure of the RV.

Nevertheless, it is a very fresh and very readable translation. It is the most beautiful translation of the 20th century and in many places has moving and powerful passages.

The great NT prof at Cambridge, C. H. Dodd, was the project director. Dodd had a brilliant mind and a quick wit. He had memorized the entire NT—in Greek! He knew several languages, ancient and modern. And his skills in both Greek and English would be the 20th century equivalent of Tyndale's in the 16th century.

Just two examples:

Luke 11.48—In Jesus’ scathing rebuke of the religious leaders, the passage in Greek is beautifully terse. But many translations get wordy and cumbersome. The **KJV**: “Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres.”

NEB: “and so [you] testify that you approve of the deeds your fathers did; they committed the *murders* and you provide the **monuments**.” This comes as close to picking up the snappy feel of the original as any translation I’ve seen.

John 1.1—Virtually all translations follow the KJV, which follows Tyndale: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

NEB is very bold to depart from that tradition rendering here: “In the beginning the Word already was. The Word was in God’s presence, and *what God was, the Word was*.” Although this is not as literal as the traditional rendering, it is actually more faithful to the meaning of the original. John is not saying that the Word is the same *person* as God; he’s saying that he shares the same *essence* that God has. In the original Greek, this statement is the most concise way that John could both affirm that Christ is equal to the Father and distinct from the Father. The NEB captures that truth better than any other translation.

Problems:

- Not a good study Bible, because it is so free in its wording.
- At times, it really misses the mark of what the Greek text means.

2. The New International Version (1973, 1978)

Like the NASB, this is another evangelical reaction to the RSV.

- Although 100 scholars from many denominations and three countries worked on it, it is largely an American effort.
- First major American translation *not* in the KJV tradition.
- Highly readable, but hardly elegant.
- By 1995, outsold KJV. #1 book in the world. Over 100 million sold.

Problems:

- *Readability* seems to have been a higher priority than anything else. Creates shorter sentences, **but** the continuity of thought is often lost. Example: **1 Peter 5.6-7**: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. *Cast* all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” ... [explain ‘cast’ is a participle—it explains *how* to humble ourselves, *by casting our cares*. Not two separate ideas, but totally connected. To humble yourself before God is not a negative act; you do it *positively* by giving him your troubles!]
- 100 scholars worked on this—that’s too many. Not all well-qualified. I do not know how their opinions were weighed, but with this many scholars it seems that the lowest common denominator could reign in several places. That is, if this was done by a democratic process at all, the translation would often have the least undesirable reading rather than the most desirable to some. Democracy is a great leveler of elegance, exchanging great literature for mundane clarity.

- It is so readable that it has no memorable expressions, nothing that lingers in the mind. This is a serious problem for the NIV that is not always acknowledged.

C. Other Formal Equivalent Translations Since 1971

1. The New King James Bible (1979, 1983)

The NKJB is another formal equivalent translation. It significantly updates the KJV, making it much more accurate of a translation. But there are two problems with this translation.

First, the translation is much more like the NASB than the KJV. And that means that the beauty of the original KJ has been sacrificed. But what do we get in exchange? Nothing that can't be found in the RSV or the NASB.

Second, the NKJ is based on the *same Greek text as the old KJ!* None of the editors believed that the Erasmus text always went back to the original. In fact, even though they were quite sympathetic to that kind of text, they felt that the *Textus Receptus* of the KJB was wrong in nearly 2000 places! And still they used it to translate from.

Nevertheless, if someone wants to understand the *old* KJB better, the NKJB is the best tool to do it with.

2. The New Revised Standard Version (1989)

By 1989, the RSV was nearly 40 years old. A lot of things had changed in those 40 years. For one thing, several significant MS discoveries had been made. For another, the English language had undergone some important alterations.

In Psalm 50.9, the RSV had God say, "I will accept **no bull** from your house"! In 1952 English this meant that God would not accept any sacrifices, including bulls. But in 1989 "I will accept no bull" means something decidedly different. It was time to revise the revision once again.

English had changed in some other ways, too. No longer was "man" commonly understood to be a generic term that could include women. And *all* older translations used 'man' in this way; all older translations were *gender exclusive*. A new translation was needed—one that was current with the language.

Not only this, but it had become politically *incorrect* in some circles to use the generic "he" when referring to a mixed group. So, both because of language shifts and, in my view, cultural pressures, the NRSV became one of the first *gender-inclusive* translations of the Bible.

For example, in John 14.23, the *old* RSV records Jesus' words this way: "If a *man* loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." The problem with this translation is that it excludes women in *today's* English. And the Greek text does not exclude women—there is in fact no Greek word for *man* in this verse!

Now, an appropriate fix would be to render the verse, "If *anyone* loves me, *he* will keep my word, and my Father will love *him*, and we will come to *him* and make our home with *him*." This, in fact, best represents the meaning of the Greek.

But the NRSV views even that translation as *gender-exclusive*. It renders this verse as follows: “*Those* who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love *them*, and we will come to *them* and make our home with *them*.”

The problem with this rendering is that in order to avoid being politically incorrect, the NRSV has actually misrepresented the text. The point of the passage is the *intimacy* that both the Father and the Son can have with *each one of us*. By using the plural throughout, that one-on-one intimacy is wiped out.

In some other passages the meaning is changed in even more dramatic ways. In 1 Tim 3.2, e.g., instead of saying that the elder should be ‘*husband* of one wife’ the NRSV says that the elder should be ‘married only once.’ No longer is the requirement that an elder be a *man* found in the translation.

It is unfortunate that the NRSV has gone to such lengths to maintain a gender-inclusive rendering. However, it could have gone much, much further. When the NRSV was getting under way, one of the translators on the committee suggested that God be treated as a woman. If this suggestion had been approved, the Lord’s Prayer would have begun, “Our *Mother* who is in heaven”! The Great Commission would be: “Baptize them in the name of the *Mother*, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”!

Dr. Bruce Metzger, who was the chairman of the committee, dealt with this issue swiftly and decisively. Now, Dr. Metzger is a conservative Christian, and a diplomatic genius. He could sell ice cubes to eskimos; he could tell you to go to hell and make you look forward to the trip!

So he responded to this woman translator: “Yes, I believe we should call God a ‘she.’ ... And we should call the *devil* a she, too!” That was the end of the discussion.

Overall, the NRSV is an excellent translation whose only real flaw is its gender-inclusive thrust. Not only does this change the meaning of the text in some places, but it also is bad English style.

3. The Holman Christian Standard Version (2000, 2001?)

In 1997, an article by Susan Olasky in *World Magazine* shocked the evangelical community when it suggested that the upcoming revision of the NIV was going to become gender-inclusive—just like the NRSV. This one article created a huge uproar. The possibility that the most popular Bible translation in the world would become gender-inclusive was too much.

In 1952, a *single* woman (the woman of Isa 7.14) was the prime mover in most Bible translations for the next several decades. Now, 45 years later, *all women*—women as a class—were doing the same thing!

The Holman Christian Standard Version, sponsored by the SBC, is in some measure a reaction to the revised NIV that hasn’t (in 2001) even appeared yet. In some respects, this translation represents a fracturing of the evangelical community. It seems that Bibles have become political and religious pawns once again.

Nevertheless, regardless of the initial impetus behind this translation, it is probably going to be a very good work. I haven’t read much of it, but what I have read looks pretty good to me.

4. The English Standard Version (2001)

Then there's the English Standard Version. This translation is an evangelical reaction to the NRSV. The publisher, Crossway Books, bought the rights to the RSV and is now in the process of revising the RSV in a direction that is different from the NRSV. A team of scholars is in the process of updating the translation *without* making it gender-inclusive. It promises to be a good translation, though for some tastes, a bit too formal. It is consciously in line with KJV.

D. A New Era Begins with the NET Bible (1998, 2001)

1. Commitment to Accessibility: www.netbible.org

A new era in Bible translating began with the NET Bible. What makes this translation unique is that it is *not* reacting to the RSV, the NIV, or the NRSV! And it is *not* in the King James tradition, which makes the New English Translation the first completely new major translation in a quarter of a century.

I'd like to tell you a number of things about this translation, but we're out of time once again. So, I'll tell you the three most important things about the NET Bible.

First, I've given you the website address—"netbible.org." This Bible is free on the internet—and it will be free forever. You can not only download it and print it off, but you can also read about it on this website.

We're in a situation today in which pastors are using a different translation from their congregations. Pastors, especially evangelical pastors, tend to prefer more formal equivalent translations such as RSV or NASB. But laypeople tend to prefer more readable translations, especially the NIV. This is parallel to the situation that gave rise to the KJV: Bishops and Geneva. It is our desire to bridge this gap with the NET Bible. Already a few churches have adopted the NET Bible as its official translation. It is our prayer that others will follow and that the gulf between pulpit and pew will be bridged.

2. Principles of Translation

Second, we have traced the history of the English Bible through three major periods: the period of elegance, the period of accuracy, and the period of readability.

The NET Bible is the first translation that *attempts* to hit all these marks—accurate, readable, and elegant. But frankly, these goals are often in conflict. Nevertheless, it is the desire of the editors that this translation will be as accurate as the formal equivalent translations, as readable as the dynamic equivalent translations, and more elegant than either.

Firsts:

- first to be beta-tested. And the process has been open to all. You can even now send in comments and suggestions. 100,000s have seen it on-line and have made suggestions.
- first evangelical translation to translate Isa 7.14 as 'young woman.'
- first modern conservative translation to include Apocrypha.
- translators were picked because they had all taught these books in the original.

3. A True Study Bible

Third, the NET Bible has more notes in it than any other Bible in history. There are currently over 60,000 notes for the whole Bible. Here's what Chuck Swindoll, President of Dallas Seminary had to say about these notes:

“There are many wonderful things I could say about the NET Bible, but the most important is this: the NET Bible is a Bible you can trust. The translation is clear, accurate, and powerful. And the notes, those wonderful notes! They bring to the layman scholarly insights and discussions that have up till now been accessible only to those trained in the biblical languages. If you are serious about studying Scripture, get a copy of the NET Bible.”

That's all I have time to tell you about the NET Bible.

E. Conclusion

Let me conclude. Are we better off today with all these translations—or worse? What are the real differences?

Except for the NKJV, virtually all modern translations are following the most ancient MSS. So, the *textual* basis (though different in a few particulars) is largely the same. And even here, *no cardinal doctrine is at stake in any of these textual differences*. God has preserved his word in such a way that a person could get saved reading the KJV, Tyndale, Bishops', RSV, NIV, REB or NET.

As for the *translation*, there are three different flavors: accurate, readable, elegant. Each Christian should own *at least one of each* flavor. I recommend RSV, ESV, and NASB for accurate, NIV for readable, and REB for elegance. Or, what tries to combine all of these, the NET. And for study, the NET Bible is by far the best.

Does all this cause confusion? Have we somehow lost the sure Word of God? No, not at all. The reality is that the certainty that the King James Bible provided for 270 years could only happen if the church and state combined forces, as they did in 1611 England. But things are different now, especially in America. I don't think we really want the U.S. Senate telling us what Bible we should have in our churches!

For the first 1500 years of the church's existence, we had only handwritten MSS. But the church was able to survive with that. And those MSS differed more than the modern translations do today! It is only with the invention of the printing press that we have been able to embrace the myth of certainty about all the particulars of the wording of the Bible. Even though there are significant differences in the wording and style of these new Bibles, they all proclaim the same message.

Final conclusion: Even with the proliferation of Bibles today, Christians are reading their Bibles less and less. I believe the evangelical church has only 50 years of life left. 50 years left of evangelicalism because of marginalization of the Word of God. We need another Reformation! The enemy of the gospel now is not religious hierarchy but moral anarchy, not tradition but entertainment. The enemy of the gospel is Protestantism run amok; it is an anti-intellectual, anti-knowledge, feel-good faith that has no content and no convictions. Part of the communal repentance that is needed is a repentance about the text. And even more importantly, there must be a repentance with regard to Christ our Lord. Just

as the Bible has been marginalized, Jesus Christ has been ‘buddy-ized.’ His transcendence and majesty are only winked at, as we turn him into the genie in the bottle, beseeching God for more conveniences, more luxury, less hassle, and a life without worries or lack of comfort. He no longer wears the face that the apostles recognized. Or, as Erasmus remarked, “When you read the Greek New Testament, you can see the face of Jesus more clearly than if you were one of his disciples”! A bit of hyperbole, but the point is worth underscoring: The God we worship today no longer resembles the God of the Bible. Unless we return to him *through* a reading and digesting of the scriptures—through a *commitment* to the text, the evangelical church will become irrelevant, useless, dead.