

A Certainty beyond Emotion

-- Can a Modern Bible Translation Be Biblical?

By Les Dennis

Introduction

The King James Version of the Bible has been used for many years. It has made a definite impact upon our culture, as well as our religious life. The King James Version has helped shape our language. Since it has been the Bible of English Protestant Christianity for many generations, the faith of many Christians is tightly bound up with the King James Version.

The King James Version has served us well; however, it is a translation of the Scriptures, not the original manuscripts as God "breathed" them. Being a translation, it must be evaluated on the basis of being a translation, just as other versions are evaluated.

God's Unchanging Word

While God's Word never changes, translations of God's Word can, and often do, change. The King James Version has been no exception. Most who use the King James Version today are unaware that there have been many changes to the King James Version since 1611. Few English speakers today can read the current King James Version with the same degree of fluency with which they can read a good modern version. Fewer still can read the 1611 edition with any fluency at all.

It is never wrong to update and correct errors of translation, even if it is a translation of God's Word. One reason that the King James Version has been so relevant over so many generations has been the willingness to change it as the English language has changed. "The King James Version with which most are likely to be familiar is the 1769 edition. This was the fourth major revision-- there were many other minor revisions.

Just before the King James Version was translated, the Geneva Bible was the most commonly used version. Some of the translators of the King James Version used the Geneva Bible even after the King James Version was completed. When the King James Version was presented to the public, it was greeted with distrust. It took time to gain wide public acceptance.

Some were upset, believing that the translators had tampered with the Word of God. Why was a new version needed? After all, did they not have the Geneva Bible? Some complained about the notes in the margins. It would shake the confidence of the people, some insisted, as if hiding the facts would foster true faith. The translators answered, "Some peradventure would haue no varietie of sences to be set in the margine, lest the authoritie of the Scriptures for deciding of controuersies by that shew of vncertainitie, should somewhat be shaken. But we hold their judgment not to be sound in this point."¹

The King James Version translators were among the first to admit that God allowed some room for variation. Refusal to face the truth is never a good policy. It was not acceptable in 1611, and it is not acceptable today. "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32 KJV 1769 edition).

In the original King James Version translator's note to the readers, the translators said, "... it hath pleased God in his diuine providence, heere and there to scatter wordes and sentences of that difficultie and doubtfulnesse, not in doctrinall points that conceme saluation (for in such it hath beene vouched that the Scriptures are plaine) but in matters of lesse moment, that fearefulnesse would better beseeme vs then confidence..."²

The King James Version translators understood the difficulties of their task and realized that they were not perfect men. They believed in the inspiration of the original manuscripts, but did not make claims of inerrancy for their own translation. Indeed, later they were accused of making too many changes. The translators wrote, "Yet before we end we must answere a third cauill and obiection of theirs against vs, for altering and amending our Translations so oft; wherein truly they deal hardly, and strangely with vs. For to whom euer was it imputed for a fault (by such as were wise) to goe ouer that which hee had done, and to amend it where hee saw cause?"³

The original spellings of 1611 are retained in all use of the quotations from the King James translator's note to the readers. The usual "sic" notation is not used since the spelling variations are not errors, but rather, they are correct spellings of English as it once was.

To deny alternate renderings, whether they are caused by differences of translation or by variety in the original language texts available, may on the surface alleviate insecurities of the fearful, but those fears will not remain buried forever. True confidence comes from facing the truth about God and his method of preserving His Word.

Knowing the truth brings freedom from the bondage of fear. When all of the facts have been evaluated and the hand of God is clearly seen in His work of preservation, the gnawing insecurities that come from pushing aside the facts will be gone.

God has never been dependent upon any group of men, even translators, to keep His Word pure. He is watching over it Himself. His sovereign will determines the degree of variation allowed. He has protected doctrines and duties from any uncertainties due to questions of textual variations. He is in control. We can trust Him.

Variations in Translations

Some variation is inevitable in translating documents. English Canadians who have struggled to learn French as a second language will usually understand that two or more translators who translate a document into a second language may have differences in their translations, even if all of the translations are correct.

The Standard for Evaluating Translations of Scripture

It is neither fair nor scholarly to take one English translation and declare it to be the superior one, and then use it to test the other English translations for accuracy. Rather, all translations should be compared to the original language documents. Many of those who oppose the use of any modern version use the King James Version as the standard, rather than the original language manuscripts. The standard of comparison must be the document in the original language.

Original Languages

As much as we might prefer to make our evaluations using only the English language, it cannot be accurately done without access to the original languages as the proper standard. This requires most English speakers to depend upon the evaluations of those who are able to understand the original languages.

Consider All the Evidence

The real battle for the purity of Scripture is taking place in the study of textual criticism. Determining which original language text to use is an important area of study. The Textus Receptus, upon which the King James Version New Testament is based, is in reality a family of manuscripts with variations between them.

While it may seem satisfying to reject all New Testament manuscripts except the Textus Receptus, it is mere self-deception. To blindly eliminate a major portion of the evidence available when making a translation seems to be an untenable position. If we are serious about the purity of the God's Word, we must compare all of the evidence. By comparing and classifying all families of manuscripts, rather than just the Textus Receptus, we are able to more accurately arrive at what was in the original manuscripts. We must follow the same approach with the Old Testament texts.

Variations in the Original Languages

The range of variations between the different original language manuscripts is not as large as it would seem at first. Many of the differences have no more consequence than the dotting of an "i" or the crossing of a "t" in English. Other differences are copying errors that have no more impact than using "an" instead of "a" in English. Other differences are caused by using synonyms, where the effect on the meaning is slight if it has an effect at all.

There is no denying that there are differences which go beyond those listed above. However, there is not a single doctrine ever mentioned in the passages in question which cannot be as well or better established from other verses of Scripture. Every doctrine established in the King James Version can be just as well established from the New American Standard or the Holman Christian Standard Version. Unfortunately the New International Version (2011) has been altered in some places for political correctness.

It is clear that the original manuscripts of the Bible were inspired of God in their totality. Scripture is "God breathed" so that the end result is exactly and word for word what God wanted written. The original manuscripts are inerrant. Although we do not have the original manuscripts, we do have enough copies of the Scriptures to determine with a high degree of certainty what the original manuscripts said.

Many years ago Westcott and Hort examined the possible variations in Scripture. Keep in mind that they were among the most liberal textual critics. It would have been in their best interest to find the largest amount of variation possible. They determined that, after setting aside differences of orthography and trivial variations, only 1/1000 of the Scripture text allows for any variation that could in any way be called substantial. That is a purity of 99.9%. Of the remaining 0.1 %, there is nothing that we are to do or to believe that is affected. Any doctrine or duty mention in the

remaining 0.1 % can be just as easily established from other passages. The content of the original manuscripts is essentially settled.

That the Bible has such a high degree of purity after so many years is nothing short of phenomenal. This can only be a miracle of God in His work of preservation. No other ancient manuscript can match this standard of accuracy.

Our Debt to Generations of Scholars

The reason we have the degree of accuracy that we have today is that generations of scholars have spent their lives studying the field of textual criticism in order to get as close as possible to the original manuscripts. But why would God allow even the microscopic variations that exist? Could not the slight variations that exist be the motive that keeps these scholars studying for their entire lives? If there were no motivation to study these areas, it would be possible for uncertainty to creep in because changes would not be noticed as readily.

It Is the Word of God

Just as a Bible believer can honestly say the King James Version is the Word of God, the same Bible believer can honestly know that it is just as true to say the Holman Christian Standard Bible is the Word of God. The translator's of the King James Version wrote, "As the Kings speech which he utered in Parliament, being translated into 'French,' Dutch,' 'Italian' 'Latine,' is still the Kings Speech, though it be not interpreted by every Translator with the like grace, nor peradventure so fitly for phrase, nor so expresly for sense, every where."⁴ It is clear that the translators of the King James Version, if they were alive today, would have no problem holding up a New American Standard Version or a Holman Christian Standard Bible and declaring it to be God's Word.

Copyright

Some among the King-James-only movement raise the issue of the copyright notation at the front of recent versions. The copyright at the front of such versions as the New American Standard and Holman Christian Standard Bible is not intended to maintain a monopoly on God's Word. My personal copy of the Holman Christian Standard Bible says, "The text of the HCSB®, may be quoted in any form (written, visual, electronic, or audio) up to and inclusive of one thousand (1,000) verses without the written permission of the publisher, provided that the verses quoted do not account for more than 50 percent (50%) of the work in which they are quoted, and provided that a complete book of the Bible is not quoted." That is hardly a limitation for most legitimate purposes. Translators of the Holman Christian Standard Bible needed copyright protection in order to prevent anyone from changing the text and publishing it as if it were the real Holman Christian Standard Bible. This should be a comfort rather than grounds for an accusation.

A more disturbing event is that the publishers of the New International Version (1984) are trying to replace the 1984 edition with the 2011 edition leaving readers of the 1984 edition to go without the version that many have used since it first appeared in print. This is disturbing because the 2011 edition is unacceptable because of the change of philosophy from the 1984 edition.

A Plea for Reason

As I prepared this essay, my first thought was to choose one book written in opposition to all modern versions and evaluate the arguments presented. After being sorely disappointed because of the misuse and abuse of the facts; after being disappointed with the lack of scholarship, and, in some cases, a total disregard of the facts, the plan was abandoned. There is nothing to be gained from evaluating arguments without substance behind them. Time is better spent exposing the faulty approaches used, and then moving on to a plea for reason and common sense.

Proof by Insults

A number of books oppose certain modern versions by stringing insults together like the beads of a necklace. Sometimes the author has gone to great lengths to draw or obtain diagrams showing modern versions being consigned to perdition. Waxing eloquent with insults does not prove the case. Even showing differences, or in some cases, perceived differences between the King James Version and a modern version proves nothing. The case would be much stronger and more reasonable if differences were shown from the original language texts.

There is reason to be concerned about the attitudes shown by some authors. Since the archangel Michael, when disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, "durst not bring against him a railing accusation" (Jude 9 KJV 1769 edition), surely it is wise to handle the Word of God, even if it is not our favorite version, with at least as much respect as Michael gave the devil himself.

Amazement

It has been cause for amazement to read some books in opposition to modern versions that show a total disregard for the facts. For example, at least one author attacks the new American Standard Version by showing where it uses a pronoun referring to God rather than the word "God" as in the King James Version. The only problem is that the Greek text from which the translation was made also uses the pronoun instead of the Greek word for "God."

Another, and greater, source of concern and amazement is to find some authors who seem to be using the King James Version to correct the original language texts.

Nothing is to be gained by trying to reason with those who have been captured by emotion and have closed their minds. It is much more productive to reason with those who still retain their senses. Hopefully, those who read these words will be able to evaluate the evidence using some of the guidelines given.

Translations

To obey God properly, we must be able to read His Word in our own language. Just as the French Bible is better understood by those whose native language is French, and the German Bible is better understood by those whose native language is German, in the same way the King James Version of 1611 was better understood by those whose native language was the King's English of 1611. Those whose native language is modern English will better understand a version written in modern English.

Translations must be evaluated, not just chosen blindly. The work of translating should be done by scholars who have expertise in the original languages. It is important that the translators have the knowledge and ability to weigh all of the textual evidence. In addition, the translators should always keep in mind that they are translating God's inspired Word, and they have no right to change it to satisfy modern society.

Not all translations should be accepted as being of equal value. The Revised Standard Version was, in my opinion, translated with a liberal theological bias. The Living Bible, being a paraphrase, should not be accepted on par with a translation. Paraphrases should be used with the knowledge that they contain the interpretations of man. Some modern versions have been translated to be "politically correct", which is why I do not use the New International Version (2011) after having used the original New International Version (1984) since it first came out.

Translations must be evaluated, not just chosen blindly. The work of translation should be done by scholars who have expertise in the original languages. It is important that the translators have the knowledge and ability to weigh all of the textual evidence. In addition, the translators should always keep in mind that they are translating God's inspired Word.

Guidance for Choosing a Bible Translation

Any version that was produced by those who know all of the languages involved and who are being honest will usually be acceptable regardless of differences caused by textual criticism or translation variations. By comparing the versions and by using Bible study tools, uncertainties of any substance can be settled. Even a badly translated Bible will have some value, although it is much better to find a good translation. Although this is true it is better to use one of the better versions that is good for public reading and Bible studies as well as for personal devotions.

Among versions that I would recommend are the King James Version (1769) as well as the KJV (1611) if you can read it; American Standard Version; New King James Version; New American Standard Version; Holman Christian Standard Bible and New International Version (1984). This is not an exhaustive list but includes a few of the versions that are most likely to be on the bookshelves, except for the New International Version (1984), which is being pulled off of the bookshelves to be replaced with the New International Version (2011). It appears that those of us who have used the New International Version (1984) faithfully since it was first produced are going to be forced to go to another version unless the copyright holders of the 1984 edition change their policy. In addition to these versions, there are paraphrases and versions designed for special purposes that have value, but are not recommended for use as your primary Bible.

There are a few well known versions that are absent for a reason. The Revised Standard Version is translated with a liberal bias. The New Revised Standard Version carries the bias even further by trying to be gender neutral where the original text does not warrant it. The New International Version (2011), which is very different from the New International Version (1984) has been revised to be gender inclusive even where the original language text does not support it. Just as my recommended list is not exhaustive, neither is this list of non recommended versions.

The English Standard Version is harder to evaluate because it combines two traditions. It is a revision by conservative scholars of the Revised Standard Version, which was done by liberals. It

has a lot of good points, but I am always cautious about anything associated with the Revised Standard Version tradition. One more reservation is that the copyright holders of the Revised Standard Version, the National Council of Churches, profit from the English Standard Version. Even though it was a only lump sum payment. It just seems strange that those who produced the English Standard Version, Crossway, would pay the National Council of Churches for the right to use a liberal-slanted version and in doing so increase the resources of those who stand opposed to major doctrines held by the conservative translation team.

As a rule, it is more productive to evaluate the philosophy of translation and what the translators believe about the inspiration of Scripture than to spend years evaluating every textual variant, especially since most people do not have the original language background to evaluate each item accurately.

Conclusion

Can a modern version be biblical? The answer must be a resounding "yes". However, it is advisable to use a reasonable, common sense approach to find a good version. If the reader will evaluate the evidence provided by scholars who have done their research in the original languages and who respect the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, my purpose in writing this essay will have been achieved.

Staying with the King James Version is certainly a valid option, especially if you understand the English used. You should not be dissuaded just because so many are changing to modern versions. If you are satisfied with the King James Version and understand it well enough to know what God is saying to you, by all means stay with it. But as you decide which version you will use, seek the Lord's guidance. Ask His Spirit to "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13 KJV 1769 edition), and do not let a sense of insecurity or a fear that facing all of the evidence will somehow shake your faith hinder you from reading a version that you will understand. "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power; and of love, and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:7 KJV 1769 edition). If you give in to fear and shrink back from facing all of the evidence, the spirit you follow is not the Spirit of God, since He is not the one who gives the spirit of fear.

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The Holy Bible 1611 King James Version.

This is a word-for-word reprint of the First Edition of the Authorized Version presented in Roman letters for easy reading and comparison with subsequent editions published by Thomas Nelson Publishers, New York.

The Holy Bible King James Version.

This is the version commonly accepted today as the King James Version, the final revision of which was completed in 1769.

The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House: 1958.

Endnotes

1. The original spellings of 1611 are retained in all use of the quotations from the King James translator's note to the readers. The usual "sic" notation is not used since the spelling variations are not errors, but rather, they are correct spellings of English as it once was.
2. See footnote one.
3. See footnote one.
4. See footnote one.