

A Linguist Looks at King James

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(7/12/2000)

During our second year of marriage, Pam and I took a year off from our studies at Columbia Bible College and Seminary and worked on the staff of the seminary there. I somehow managed to land a job in the seminary admissions office, with one of my main duties being to promote our seminary on college campuses across the eastern U.S.

At one particular Bible college there were several other school recruiters who, like I, had set up their brochure tables in the student union building. During a lull in the afternoon's activity, I took the opportunity to catch up on my Bible reading. Seeing me thus engaged, one of the other recruiters came over to my table and asked me what version of the Bible I was reading.

"The *New American Standard*," I replied.

"If you want to study the true Word of God," he countered, "you should use only the authorized *King James Version*."

Not knowing what to say, I mumbled my appreciation for his concern and quickly decided to take a walk outside.

This incident was my first exposure to the KJV-only perspective, which I have since discovered has a significant following within many fundamentalist churches in the U.S. Proponents of this view contend that the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible is not merely to be preferred for stylistic or linguistic reasons, but that the KJV is indeed the only version that truly represents God's Word in the English language. Other Bible versions are considered not to have God's blessing, and are often vilified as being corruptions of God's Word, produced by liberal translators whose aim was to erode the foundational doctrines of orthodox Christianity.

In one sense I sympathize with those who promote the KJV-only view, in that I too am very concerned about the effect of anti-conservative trends in the church at large. We must, however, be careful about how we define both the terms "Word of God" and "conservative" when it comes to the matter of Bible versions.

Consider first what is the "Word of God." Technically speaking, it is a mistake to speak of the KJV or any one of the other Bible versions as *being* the Word of God. It is, of course, fine to speak this way as a sort of shorthand, but to be more precise we should say that it was *the*

original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts actually penned by Moses, Isaiah, Daniel, Luke, Paul, etc. that were the infallible, inerrant Word of God. Keep in mind that we do not actually possess today any of these original manuscripts. What we have are various ancient Hebrew, Greek, Latin, etc., copies of those originals. These various copies (of which there are thousands housed in museums and research institutions around the world) sometimes differ from each other in the details. It is the job of scholars to compare the various manuscripts we have and decide which are the most reliable, and by this process to reconstruct the wording of the extinct originals.

What then is the status of the KJV and other English Bibles? The different Bible versions that English-speakers use today are *translations* (into English) of scholars' best reconstructions of the original manuscripts (i.e., of the Word of God). The KJV was based on the most reliable ancient manuscripts (e.g., the Masoretic Text, Textus Receptus) known to scholars in King James' day (nearly 400 years ago). The translators of modern translations such as the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) and the *New International Version* (NIV) were able to take into account more ancient and reliable biblical manuscripts that have been discovered or made available since (e.g., Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Chester Beatty Papyri).

Of course, even *if* it had been the case that no new biblical manuscripts had been discovered between King James' day and our own, we would still have needed translations of God's Word other than the KJV, simply because (a) the English language has changed considerably in the last 400 years, and (b) there is more than one way to translate the same message from one language into another. I will have more to say about point (a) below. Regarding point (b), if you have studied a second language for any length of time, then you know that there are often multiple, equally good ways that a word or phrase in your native language can be translated into a second language, and vice versa. Which wording you choose can depend on the level of formality you wish to convey, the linguistic ability of your intended readers/hearers (e.g., whether they are children or adults), and a host of other subtle factors. Similarly, God's Word can be and has been translated into English in many slightly different ways, and yet in each case where due attention has been paid by the translators to the best available ancient biblical manuscripts, we can say that the outcome is reliably a translation of *God's Word*.

We must also be careful how we define the term "conservative" in regard to selecting Bible translations. The cornerstone of conservative theology is the belief that the Bible is God's unique, inspired, authoritative message to humanity. As such, the Bible must have the first and last authoritative word in all matters of faith and doctrine. Accordingly, where Bible translations are concerned, the highest priority for conservatives of any era should be this: *to have the most accurate translation of the inspired Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek biblical texts into the heart-language of the reader*. When I choose a Bible translation, I want to know that the translation I am using is the most reliable and accurate rendering of the original texts into my heart-language (which, for me, is late-20th century American English).

Now we come to what I consider to be the heart of the matter, for I see the KJV-only proponents as violating the above conservative principle in two important ways: (1) In their laudable zeal to

preserve the great doctrines of orthodox faith, KJV-only proponents inadvertently erode the authority of Scripture by making Scripture fit to dogma rather than vice versa, and (2) KJV-proponents promote a translation which often obscures the meaning of scripture to modern readers, thus inhibiting the influence of Scriptural authority in the life and belief system of the believer. I will discuss these two points in turn.

A prominent argument in much KJV-only literature is that the various other English translations tend to weaken some of the great doctrines of the faith, such as the deity of Christ. An example of the sort typically presented by KJV-only proponents can be seen in 1 Corinthians 10:9.

1 Corinthians 10:9

Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.

The New American Standard Bible

1 Corinthians 10:9

Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents.

The King James Version

The KJV states that it was "Christ" who was tempted by the Israelites, thus reinforcing Christ's deity, given that Num. 21:5 says the people's grumbling was "against God." The NASB, however, reads "the Lord" instead of "Christ," making any reference to Jesus less than clear. Because the KJV rendering appears to more firmly support the deity of Christ in cases such as the above, KJV-only proponents argue that modern translations like the NASB and NIV are suspect, and the KJV should be preferred.

But notice that this seemingly "conservative" argument in favor of the KJV actually erodes the independent authority of Scripture. By arguing that the KJV should be preferred because it (supposedly) best preserves orthodox doctrines such as the deity of Christ, KJV-only proponents are implicitly attributing a higher authority to *orthodox dogma* than to *Scripture itself*. The truly conservative principle outlined earlier demands that I should never try to make my Bible fit to my doctrine; instead, *I should make my doctrine fit to my Bible*. This is very, very important. If the Bible is going to be the basis of my faith (because I believe it to communicate the Word of God), then I must truly let the Bible speak for itself--I must not hold up a dogma or creed as the standard for my faith and then pick a Bible that fits to that dogma or creed.

Having said this, I should make it clear that I earnestly hold to the full deity of Christ. However, I believe in the deity of Christ *only* because the Bible teaches it (I believe this to be true of the NASB and similar translations as well, despite what KJV-only proponents might say). If what I thought to be the most accurate translations of the Bible available to me did not teach the deity of Christ, then I would not believe in the deity of Christ, precisely because my epistemological loyalty is first to Scripture as God's revelation, and not to any particular dogma. Dogma must flow from Scripture, not the other way around. It is wrong to give precedence to dogma--*even good dogma* like the deity of Christ, and then pick a Bible translation based on which one best accommodates that dogma.

Actually, when KJV-only proponents cite evidence of how the newer translations are eroding God's truth, they have simply demonstrated that when it comes to this kind of research, you will tend to find what you are looking for. To make my point, let us turn the tables and briefly consider seven *alarming examples* (I am speaking tongue-in-cheek here) *in which the KJV diminishes the deity of Christ*:

1. One of the most shocking examples where the KJV diminishes the deity of Christ is found in Titus 2:13. Compare the NASB rendering of this passage to the KJV's rendering:

Titus 2:13

looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus;

The New American Standard Bible

Titus 2:13

Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;

The King James Version

In the NASB rendering, it is clear that "our great God and Savior" refers to one person, Jesus Christ Himself. This makes the deity of Christ clear, by calling Him "our great God." In the KJV, however, notice the subtle but important shift in wording, to "the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." This KJV wording opens up the possibility that "the great God" and "our Saviour Jesus Christ" may refer to two distinct persons: (a) the great God, and (b) our Saviour Jesus Christ (who might *not* be God, according to this wording).

2. Compare now the NIV and KJV renderings of Colossians 1:19:

Colossians 1:19

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [i.e., Jesus] . . .

The New International Version

Colossians 1:19

For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell . . .

The King James Version

Whereas the NIV makes clear that it is all of *God's* (i.e., "his") fullness that dwells in Jesus, the KJV omits "his," leaving open the possibility that the "fulness" being referred to is something other than the fullness of God's own nature.

3. Another startling example is found in Romans 9:5:

Romans 9:5

Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is

God over all, forever praised!
The New International Version

Romans 9:5

Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all,
God blessed for ever.

The King James Version

Whereas the NIV clearly proclaims that Christ "is *God over all*," the KJV avoids this claim to Christ's deity, stating only that Christ is "over all."

4. Compare the NASB and KJV renderings of John 5:18:

John 5:18

For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

The New American Standard Bible

John 5:18

Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.

The King James Version

The NASB, which unlike the KJV takes into account the respected Nestle-Aland Greek text, includes the Greek adjective *idion* ("own") in John 5:18 before the word translated "Father." This is theologically important for the deity of Christ, because only Jesus had a completely unique relationship with God in which God was His "own" Father. God was no one else's Father in this unique way. The KJV, based as it is primarily on the inferior Textus Receptus Greek text, fails to include this adjective, thereby opening up the possibility that Jesus' relationship with the Father was not entirely unique.

5. Consider the NIV versus the KJV rendering of Jesus' response to the high priest in Mt. 26:63:

Matthew 26:63-64

But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

The New International Version

Matthew 26:63-64

But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. 64 Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said.

The King James Version

The NIV makes it clear that Jesus' response to the high priest, literally "you say," is a Greek idiom meaning "yes, it is as you say," (i.e., "what you have said is true"). Therefore, Jesus' response is a clear indication that He claimed to be the Christ, the Son of God. The KJV, however, fails to translate this idiom into its full and clear meaning for modern readers, and consequently leaves doubt as to whether Jesus actually claimed to be the Son of God. The KJV rendering could be taken to suggest that Jesus is evading the question, which He in fact is not doing.

6. Rev. 1:8 is an important passage for the deity of Christ, because it establishes that God takes on Himself the same title "Alpha and Omega" that Jesus adopts in similar passages elsewhere in Revelation (e.g., Rev. 22:12-13). Compare the NASB and KJV renderings of this verse:

Revelation 1:8

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God . . .
The New American Standard Bible

Revelation 1:8

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord . . .
The King James Version

The KJV omits the word "God" (Greek *theos*), supplying instead only the word "Lord," which by itself does not necessarily denote deity in all of its usages. The NASB includes the word "God," thus establishing more clearly that the speaker in this verse is God Himself, and in this way more forcefully reinforcing the deity of Christ through a comparison with passages such as Rev. 22:12-13.

7. Consider the description of Jesus' relationship to God in Hebrews 1:3:

Hebrews 1:3

And He [Jesus] is the radiance of His [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high;
The New American Standard Bible

Hebrews 1:3

Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;
The King James Version

The NASB makes it clear that the nature of Jesus is precisely identical to the nature of God Himself ("the exact representation of His nature"). However, the KJV diminishes this expression to merely the "image" of God. Given that all human beings are said elsewhere to be made in the image of God (Genesis 2), it becomes difficult to establish from the KJV rendering of this

passage anything more than the humanity of Jesus. The NASB rendering, in contrast, more adequately establishes the deity of Christ.

What is my point in bringing out these examples? Do I believe that there was a conspiracy behind the translation of the KJV to diminish the deity of Christ in scripture? Of course not. My point is simply that you can generally find what you are looking for, if you look diligently and single-mindedly enough (actually, I found the above seven examples with only a brief search; surely more examples of this sort could be found if one took the time to do further research). People who are claiming that the newer translations support "New Age" thinking or diminish orthodox doctrines (like the deity of Christ) are able to present apparent evidence in support of these claims only because they fail to look for or consider potential counterevidence to their claims, such as the examples presented above.

Let me now move on to the second major way in which I see KJV-only proponents to be violating true conservatism; namely, KJV-proponents promote a translation which often obscures the meaning of scripture to modern readers (especially young readers or those with little literary background). True conservatives attribute full (epistemological) authority to the Scripture, yet this authority cannot fully benefit an individual until that individual accurately *understands* the revealed message of Scripture. To the extent that a translation is written with vocabulary, phraseology, or syntax (grammar) unfamiliar to an individual, then to that extent God's intended message is being obscured, and Scripture's function as the individual's guide and authority is being hindered.

Some KJV-only proponents have gone to great lengths to deny the above charge that the KJV's antiquated English obscures meaning to modern readers. For example, one KJV-only pamphlet that I have seen compared a select list of vocabulary from the KJV with vocabulary found in the same verses from the *New King James Version* (NKJV; which KJV-only proponents generally do not accept). The pamphlet claimed that the KJV vocabulary was at a 5th grade reading level whereas the NKJV was at a 6th grade reading level.

This, however, is an entirely bogus argument. The writer of the pamphlet in question had handpicked a list of verses in which specific vocabulary items were admittedly easier in the KJV than the NKJV. But an argument based on a handpicked set of verses proves nothing. Given the chance, one could easily find just as many or more verses where the vocabulary used in the NKJV is easier than that in the KJV. But perhaps more important than the vocabulary is the *syntax*, the grammatical structure of the sentences. The KJV syntax (and much of its vocabulary) is often stilted and hard to follow, especially for younger readers and for those who are not well-versed in classical English literature, because it is based on a literary style of English that is nearly 400 years old. It is a simple fact that all natural human languages change over time. Consequently, any translation of the Bible, no matter how well researched or how precise or flowing its prose, will become outdated in time for later generations of readers.

One can find multitudes of examples of the antiquated syntax of the KJV by opening one's Bible to just about any spot. Here are a few examples just to make the point (I have italicized some of the unusual syntax and phrasing of the KJV):

KJV (Luke 4:14-17)

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and **there went out a fame of him** through all the region **round about**.¹⁵ And he taught in their synagogues, being **glorified of all**.¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, stood up **for to read**.¹⁷ And there **was delivered unto him** the book of the prophet **Esaias**.

NASB (same passage)

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit; and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. 15 And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. 16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him.

NIV (same passage)

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. 16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. 17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

It is clear in the above example that the antiquated phrases in the KJV version are absent in the NASB and NIV. Here is another example:

KJV (Colossians 2:20-22)

Wherefore if **ye be dead** with Christ from the **rudiments** of the world, why, as though living in the world, **are ye subject to ordinances**,²¹ (Touch not; taste not; handle not;²² **Which all are to** perish with the using;) **after** the commandments and doctrines of men?²³ **Which things have** indeed a **shew** of wisdom in **will worship**, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not **in any honour to** the satisfying of the flesh.

NASB (same passage)

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 21 "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" 22 (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)--in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? 23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

NIV (same passage)

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 21 "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? 22 These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their

self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Now, these differences may not seem that great, depending on how accustomed you already are to the KJV and other classical English literature. But to a young person or someone not used to it, the phraseology and syntax of the KJV can be a real discouragement from reading the scripture. Any objective observer has to admit that the KJV is in many parts *not* natural and smooth to most modern English readers. In terms of its overall phraseology and syntax it is ***emphatically not*** written at a 5th-grade reading level, as the writer of the pamphlet mentioned earlier claimed (honestly, what average 5th-grader that you know could make sense out of the last KJV-passage presented above!). I assume that what this writer had in mind was the specific list of vocabulary he had picked out to compare between select verses in the KJV and the NKJV. But when we get beyond handpicked verses and vocabulary items, the KJV overall is clearly a good deal harder to understand than most of the more modern versions.

In saying this, I do not mean to disparage the KJV. When the KJV was written it contained appropriate English for its day. But every language changes over time, as I said earlier, and English has changed a lot since King James' day. Any Bible that is promoted to the general population of modern English speakers needs to be a translation of the Bible into modern English. Otherwise, we risk putting up a barrier to the understanding of the Word of God, even as the Roman Catholic church used to insist on a Latin Bible only, so that the common people could not access the Bible directly. This is what the Reformers fought against. Thank God for people like Tyndale, who pursued a vision of translating the Bible into the common people's language so that everyone could understand the Bible for himself. Today, in my opinion, well-meaning KJV-only proponents are again putting up a barrier to God's Word just like the Roman Catholic church did in centuries past, by insisting on a version of the Bible that is not in the common people's heart-language.

So then, my two main criticisms of the KJV-only position are that (1) it inadvertently erodes the authority of Scripture by making the choice of Scripture translation dependent on orthodox doctrine, rather than insisting that doctrine must conform to Scripture, and (2) the KJV-only position sets up a barrier to understanding the Word of God by insisting on a translation of the Bible in antiquated English.

There are other, more minor difficulties with the KJV-only position. For example, to claim that only the KJV is the Word of God raises thorny questions about how God's Word is supposed to be spread to people in non-English speaking countries. Must non-English speakers perpetually live with less-than-the-best translations into their languages that are *not* truly the Word of God, as the KJV is? One might respond with the hypothesis that God recognizes and blesses one (and only one) translation of the Bible into each language (as He has supposedly uniquely blessed the KJV for English). But this leads to other thorny questions. *Who* is privileged to decide which translation is the "blessed" one for languages that have more than one available translation of the Bible (as is the case, for example, in Chinese, which has at least three versions of the Bible of which I am aware). Perhaps the *first* translation into a given language should always be considered the divinely-recognized one. But then, the first translation into a language is often the

most rough, and subsequent translations typically produce more polished and accurate results. Besides, the KJV was not the first English translation of the Bible, so by this criterion the KJV would be ruled out as God's choice for the English Bible.

A similarly difficult question arises when we consider the fact that languages change over time. If the Lord tarries and the Church is still on earth another 400 years from now, will the KJV still be God's chosen translation for the English Bible? What about 1000 years from now? The English spoken then will almost certainly bear only a strange resemblance to the English in use now. The KJV will likely be entirely unreadable to the common English speaker of that period (even as the earliest recorded written English is to readers of our day). Will God then at some point between now and that future time drop the KJV and anoint another English translation instead? But if so, how will the Church know the switch has occurred? Who will decide? Questions like these further illustrate the difficulty of maintaining the KJV-only position.

It seems to me that the wisest course for the serious Bible student, rather than being bound to only one English translation of the Bible, is to become familiar with *several* translations of the Bible. This can include both relatively literal translations like the KJV, NKJV or NASB, and more fluid thought-for-thought translations like the NIV or New Century Version. (Better yet, learn Greek and Hebrew; but this is obviously not an available option for everyone.)

Most importantly, *apply* what you study and learn, lest as James 1:23-24 says you be "like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass" (i.e., NIV "mirror"), who "straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was" (i.e., NIV "forgets what he looks like").

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