

The Question.

"Which English version of the Scriptures should we use? Which is the best translation?"

These are questions taken from a letter which I recently received and I am fairly confident that they are as familiar to almost every other teacher or preacher of the Word of God - and, indeed, to every older Christian - as they are to me, because they are questions with which most devout students of the scriptures find themselves confronted, at some time or another in the course of their spiritual journey.

To this we must also add the fact that these are questions which have, through many years, given rise to quite serious debate, as Christians have compared the merits of the various English versions that are currently available.

The 'K.J.V'.

There are, for instance, many believers who are utterly convinced that there is one version which outshines and surpasses and which will survive all others, and that is the venerable K.J.V; the familiar 'King James Version', and they advance what they regard as incontrovertible reasons for adopting this position. They point out that:-

- 1) The K.J.V. is the oldest of the English versions in use today, having stood the test of time. It has been with us for almost 400 years and its very durability is an eloquent testimony to its worth.
- 2) It is still the most widely used and best loved of all the English versions.
- 3) It survived the early attempts of Roman Catholicism to prevent it from reaching the hands of the people, as well as the subsequent attacks that have been made upon it by critics and unbelievers of all kinds.
- 4) The beauty of its English prose is unsurpassed by anything modern scholars have produced and, even from a mere literary point of view, it must be regarded as one of the greatest treasures of English literature.

Furthermore, enthusiastic advocates of the K.J.V. have sometimes claimed that it is the most accurate version yet to be produced from the original biblical languages. And, they point out, after all, is it not *'the Authorized Version'*? This is a notion that, in the thinking of some, must surely give it special status.

Now let me, at this juncture, place on record by own affection for the K.J.V. It is, after all, the Bible version with which I was brought up and in which, many years ago, most of my memory work was done. I make this statement because there are certain historical facts that need to be set out, and I would not wish anyone to suppose that I am 'anti-K.J.V', because I draw attention to them.

The Unanswerable Question?

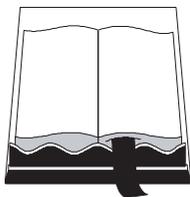
"Which version should we use?" Someone said that to ask the question is rather like asking, "Which car should I drive?" The answer is that the car you should choose depends on the use you have in mind for it.

Put it this way; If you have little interest in car-mechanics and simply want a vehicle that will transport you from 'a to b', there is a vast range of suitable vehicles from which to choose. But, if you are a mechanically-minded car enthusiast and you want a more technically-advanced, high performance sort of vehicle, these, too, are readily available. The choice is yours! So with Bible versions.



1. First, think about the question in relation to *personal Bible study and private devotion*. In other words, think about your spiritual needs. There are some versions that present the scriptures in plain and simple language which many readers find satisfactory because this meets their needs; and there are other versions that are clearly designed to meet the requirements of the more serious Bible student who is prepared to make the effort to discover the deeper, subtler shades of meaning that are to be found in the vast richness of God's Word. An Elder in a certain congregation once said to me, "*Frank, do you think that an Elder should know Greek?*" My reply was, "*Yes – if he wants to*". In other words, among the many versions, there are some that offer the plain milk of the Word for the young in faith, and there are others which provide 'strong meat' for those of greater experience and riper years. There is a version to meet the need of each individual. Not everyone wishes to study the original Greek text. But everyone can derive a blessing from the scriptures in good, simple English.
2. If it is a question concerning the choice of *the version most suitable for congregational use*; that is, for the reading of the scriptures in public worship, I suggest that this is where sound judgment and 'sanctified common sense' needs to be used.

Leaders of congregations should reach a carefully considered decision as to which version will be of the greatest benefit to those who listen when the scriptures are read in a service, and, in my view, this would mean ruling out the use of unfamiliar or unusual versions which the congregation cannot follow and to which it cannot relate. If the majority of the church-members are most familiar with the K.J.V, so be it! Read from the K.J.V.! But if the leadership decides to use a different, more modern version, I suggest that it has the responsibility to provide enough copies of that version to enable the congregation to follow the reading.



It is most frustrating – and confusing – to try to 'read along', when the reader has chosen to use an unfamiliar and little used version of the scriptures.

All Versions have Shortcomings.

Having said all of this, I must point out that, no matter which version we use, in private or in public, we are likely to find things which make us feel uncomfortable and perhaps even downright annoyed! (I must confess that I personally experience annoyance with certain modern versions, because of their improper use of English grammar).

But, if you think about it, the reason why some versions disappoint is obvious. We acknowledge that the books of both the Old and New Testaments were originally written by men who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and what they wrote was the infallible Word of God. But we must also recognize that the men who *translated* the original scriptures into English in order to produce the versions we use today, were *not inspired*, and therefore the work they published inevitably contain the evidence of human fallibility.

Indeed, the translators themselves have always been the first to acknowledge their own limitations. I know of only one exception to this. The exception was Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism.

I have before me, as I write, a bible, published in 1867, which, on its title-page claims to be, "*The Holy Scriptures, Translated and Corrected by the Spirit of Revelation, by Joseph Smith, Jr., The Seer*". I should point out that Joseph did not possess either Hebrew or Greek manuscripts from which to translate. And even if he had, an insurmountable problem remained. He knew neither Hebrew or Greek!

So, there are no divinely – inspired translations. Not even the revered K.J.V. escapes this fact, and we are unwise if we think otherwise.

Consider its History.

The version we know as the '*King James Version*' was not the first English version to be produced, by any means. The names of Wycliffe and Tyndale readily spring to mind.

There was, among the better-known versions, the '*The Great Bible*' – 'great', because of its size. This was a translation made by Miles Coverdale on the orders of Thomas Cromwell and published in 1539, which, co-incidentally, was the year in which Thomas became the 'Lord Great Chamberlain' to Henry 8th. It was this 'Great Bible' that was securely chained in each parish church and which could be read freely by anyone who had the ability to read. I mention this version, because this was the Bible which, the following year, when a new edition was printed, stated on its title-page, "*This is the Bible appointed to the use of the churches*".

It is in this sense that it became '*the authorized version*', but there is no historical evidence to show that *any* English version was ever 'authorized' by either King or Parliament, and, certainly, none was ever 'divinely authorized'!

It is not surprising, therefore, that when, in 1611, the 'K.J.V.' was produced, it also carried the same declaration on its title-page, indicating that it was '*permissible to read it in churches*'. Furthermore, we should note that the connection between the 1611 version and King James himself was a very loose one! He neither commanded the translation to be made, nor did he provide any money to pay for the work to be done!

James - (*the 1st of England, but the 6th of Scotland!*)- merely agreed with a proposal made by John Reynolds during the Hampton Court Conference of 1604 that, in view of the general dissatisfaction being expressed with existing versions, a new translation should be made, and it was this new Bible that made its appearance in 1611 which perpetuates the name of King James.

It is recorded that the King expressed the hope that the new Bible would be a work '*of such excellence that the entire church would be bound to it and to no other*'. But this proved to be a vain hope. There was great controversy and a great deal of criticism expressed, because the new version simply did not please the many divisions that existed both inside and outside of the Church of England. And it most certainly did not please the Church of Rome, whose leaders declared, "*If it must be translated into English, Catholics are the fittest to do it*"

There is no doubt that the K.J.V. of 1611 was far from perfect. One scholar of that period, William Kilburn, declared in 1659, that in the *six different revisions* of the K.J.V. made during the 1650s, he had found no fewer than 20,000 errors. Another critic, Hugh Broughton, said after examining the translation, that it was '*so poorly done that it would grieve him as long as he lived*'.

No doubt most of these faults were trivial matters – probably printing and spelling errors, but there were also some serious faults, and the version passed through many more revisions before it was decided to produce what became known as, '*The English Revised Version*' of 1881.

What I find rather strange is that, although the K.J.V. of today is very different from the original 1611 edition, some of these textual errors remain. Look, for example, at 1st Cor. 13:5. Modern versions have correctly removed the word '*easily*', because it is not found in the Greek text, and the '*English Revised Version*' was the first from which the word was removed. Another strange rendering is still found in the K.J.V. of Matt.23:24, where we find, '*strain at a gnat*', corrected, of course, in modern versions, to read '*strain out a gnat*'.

I think many of us are also aware of the fact that the translators of 1611, deliberately avoided translating the words '*baptismos*' and '*baptizo*' with the English '*immersion*' and '*immerse*', or '*dip*', because this would expose the practices of 'sprinkling' and 'pouring' for baptism, as

unscriptural. They chose, instead to 'anglicize' the Greek words, and translated them 'baptism and baptize', in this way hiding the correct action of the ordinance commanded by the Lord Himself.

Why did the faults appear in the 'K.J.V'?

It is important to bear in mind that the original K.J.V was based largely on the work produced by Erasmus almost a century earlier, who, in 1516, made use of medieval documents and did not have access to the Greek manuscripts that were available when the Revised Version was produced in 1881. Today, there are more than 5000 Greek manuscripts available to scholars. Two of the three oldest of these, the Alexandrian and the Sinaitic, are today in the new British Library in London.

Do we Need New Versions?

Whether we like it or not, new versions will certain be produced from time to time, simply because unlike the Hebrew and Greek in which the scriptures originally appeared and which are now 'dead languages', English is a living language in which new words are constantly being created, whilst old words become obsolete, or even change their meanings. Look, for example, at the word 'yet' in Rom.1:13 of the K.J.V. In 1611 the word meant 'prevented' or 'hindered' It is surely commendable that biblical scholars are concerned to produce versions of the scriptures in language which can understand and with which readers are comfortable,

The New International Version

The most recent *widely accepted* version - (*I think!*) - is the 'N.I.V', which appeared in 1978. When this version of the entire Bible first made its appearance, the publishers expressed the hope that 'it would do for our time what the K.J.V. did for its day'. Considering the fact that it took many revisions throughout many years before the K.J.V. achieved popular acceptance, perhaps we should say that it is still too early to pronounce a verdict on this latest version. Let us say that 'the jury is still out', although I have noticed that it is being used in certain congregations when a reader is allowed to use the version of his own choosing.

If accuracy of translation is judged by the number of scholars engaged in a project, then the 'N.I.V', should be the most accurate Bible yet produced, because the largest group of translators in history was brought together to produce it. They were organized into 20 groups, whose work was examined by two committees, who then passed in on to another committee for final scrutiny, before it was approved for publication.



And yet, all this organization and care did not prevent the appearance of questionable translations. For instance, Psalm 51:5 is rendered, in a way which gives the verse an entirely different meaning. Instead of the familiar 'I was born in sin', we are given, 'I have been a sinner from my birth', which gives the verse an entirely different meaning.

Brother Foy E. Wallace, who was a very forceful advocate of the 'K.J.V'. was equally forceful in his condemnation of the 'N.I.V', in an article which appeared in the "*Gospel Advocate*" in 1975. Reviewing the work in progress, he accused the translators of producing a Bible 'tintured throughout with the erroneous doctrines of original sin, hereditary depravity, the restoration of national Israel, pre-millennialism and predestination'.

The obvious message therefore is, 'handle with care'. Compare version with version, and remember that translations made by individuals are more likely to contain serious doctrinal errors than those made by groups of scholars, whose work has been more closely scrutinized and corrected.

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