7 Things you may not know about the King James Bible

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The King James Version of the Bible is a great translation and has helped countless thousands of people to find and know God, to receive his gift of salvation, and to effectively serve him and his people. The Bible was beautifully written by some of the best scholars of the day and its reputation as fine literature is deserved.

Some Christians today maintain that the KJV is the superior English translation. Some Christians and churches are so enamoured with the KJV that they refuse to use, or give credit to, any other translation. The stance of these Christians has been referred to as King-James-Onlyism.

The KJV is an excellent English Bible and if you can easily understand it there is no real reason to change to another translation. However, one of the biggest shortcomings for most people is its dated language.

The Language of the King James Bible

The KJV uses many archaic words: words such as jangling, subtil, privily, and holpen, etc. And it uses archaic expressions and phrases that are unfamiliar to modern readers. For instance, how many people readily understand “Charity vaunteth not itself”? Earlier editions of the KJV also used spelling that is outdated, which can be confusing for some readers (e.g., sunne for “sun”).

Furthermore, the edition of the KJV that is still commonly used contains several words that have changed in meaning over time. Words such as flowers, suffer, vile, conversation and quit convey different meanings to modern readers than was intended by either the KJV translators or the original authors of the biblical text. (See Lev. 15:24KJV; Matt. 19:14KJV; Phil. 3:20-21KJV; 1 Cor. 16:13KJV, etc.)

The fact that the KJV uses the word “unicorn” nine times (see here and here), and “satyr” twice (Isa. 13:21KJV; Isa. 34:14KJV), is also problematic, as unicorns and satyrs are regarded as mythological creatures rather than the real animals, wild oxen and goats, that are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and in more contemporary translations.

Apart from its dated language, there are a few other shortcomings that KJV-only people seem unaware of. Moreover, many accept incorrect statements that are frequently made about the KJV. The following paragraphs contain seven pieces of information that some KJV-only Christians may not be aware of.
(1) The KJV was not the first English translation.

A few King-James-Only Christians believe that the King James Bible was the first English translation of the Scriptures. This belief, however, is incorrect. John Wycliffe’s Bible was translated from Latin into English and hand copied in the 1400s. In 1526, almost 100 years before the KJV was first published, William Tyndale’s English translation of the Greek New Testament was printed. A decade or so later, full English Bibles began to be printed. First came the Coverdale Bible (1535-1537) which used Tyndale’s NT, as did the Matthew Bible (1537). Then came Richard Taverner’s Bible (1539), closely followed by the Great Bible (1539-1541). The Geneva Bible (1556-1560) was published by and for Calvinist Puritans. The Bishops’ Bible (1568) was based on the Great Bible and edited by Church of England bishops, partly, in response to the Geneva Bible. The Douay Rheims Bible (1582-1609) was translated from the Latin Vulgate, rather than Hebrew and Greek, for the Roman Catholic Church.[1]

Much of the KJV, which was first published in 1611, borrows heavily from earlier English translations, especially Tyndale’s New Testament and the Bishop’s Bible. Furthermore, the KJV was not the first approved or first authorised English translation. The 1537 edition of the Coverdale Bible was officially approved by Henry VIII and bears the royal license on the title page, and the Great Bible was authorised by Henry VII. Thomas Cromwell, Vicar General and Henry’s secretary issued an injunction that a copy of the Great Bible “be set up in every parish church. It was consequently the first (and only) English Bible formally authorized for public use.”[2]

(2) The KJV has been through several editions.

Some King-James-Only Christians believe that the King James Bible perfectly preserved the Scriptures for all time. If this is the case there would have been no need for further edits. The current edition of the KJV is different from the original 1611 translation and several other early editions. “The KJV Bible we use today is actually based primarily on the major revision completed in 1769, 158 years after the first edition.”[3]

(3) King James authorised the new Bible translation for political reasons.

King James believed that a single, authorised version was a political and social necessity. He hoped this book would hold together the warring factions of the Church of England and the Puritans that threatened to tear apart both church and country. Most of the translators, however, were clergymen belonging to the Church of England, but at least some had Puritan sympathies.[4]

King James issued over a dozen rules that the translators had to follow. He disliked the Geneva Bible, the Bible used by the Puritans, because he believed that some of the comments in the margin notes were seditious and did not show enough respect for kings.[5] James’ new translation was to have no commentary in the margins.

King James favoured the hierarchical structure of the Church of England and wanted the new translation to use words that supported a bishop-led hierarchy. In keeping with his preferred views
on church government, he specified, “The old ecclesiastical words [are] to be kept; as the word church [is] not to be translated congregation.” (I personally believe “congregation” is a better translation of the Greek word *ekklēsia* in some verses.) King James also ruled that only his new Bible could be read in England’s churches. (The translation rules of King James can be found [here.](#) The political motives of King James had a direct influence on the translation of the KJV.

(4) The Translators of the KJV 1611 were untrained in Koine Greek.

Koine (“common”) Greek is the original language of the New Testament, but the KJV translators of the New Testament were scholars of Classical Greek and were unfamiliar with Koine Greek. Some believed that the Greek language of the NT was a unique, Spirit-inspired dialect.[6] It was not until the late 1800s and early 1900s, when tens of thousands of papyrus documents were discovered, many written in Koine, that we could begin to understand the language more fully.[7] Unlike the translators of the KJV, modern translators of the New Testament are scholars of both Classical and Koine Greek.

(5) The KJV translation of the NT is based on relatively recent Greek manuscripts.

As well as relying on previous English translations, the 1611 edition of the KJV relied on critically edited Greek texts that were “for the most part based on about half a dozen very late manuscripts” (none earlier than the 12th century AD).”[8] The Greek texts included five printed editions of the Greek New Testament by Erasmus,[9] as well as Robert Estienne’s (a.k.a. ‘Stephanus’) edition (1550) and Theodore Beza’s edition (1598). Michael Holmes writes more about the Greek texts behind English Bibles [here.](#)

Unfortunately, one of the manuscripts Estienne and Beza used for their Greek editions contained a few “corrections” that downplayed the importance of women in the church.[10]

(6) The Textus Receptus, or Received Text, is basically Erasmus’ Greek text.

Many KJV advocates claim that the New Testament in the King James Bible was translated from a Greek text known as the Textus Receptus (TR) and that the TR is especially accurate and inspired. The term Textus Receptus was first coined in 1633, after the KJV was first published, and it basically refers to Erasmus’ critical text. The current version of the TR was produced in 1894 by Scrivener who preferred the Byzantine, or Majority, Text. (The Byzantine-Majority Text is similar but not identical to the Textus Receptus.)[11]

Most modern translations of the New Testament are based on critical Greek texts that take into account a larger collection of texts than used by Erasmus for his critical texts. This collection includes much more ancient Greek manuscripts than were available to Erasmus. A few of these manuscripts date from as early as the third century, which makes them much closer to the date that the New Testament books and letters were written by the biblical authors.
(7) All early edition of the KJV contained the apocryphal books.

While not a necessarily shortcoming, the 1611 version, and all other editions of the KJV that were published for the next fifty years, contained the Apocrypha. Protestant Christians do not regard the apocryphal books as uniquely inspired and authoritative. The 1666 edition was the first edition of the KJV that did not include these extra books. (Article six of the Thirty-Nine Articles, ratified in 1562 before the KJV was first published, explains the Church of England’s position on the canonical and apocryphal books.)

Criticism of recent Bible translations

One of the criticisms levelled at some modern English translations is that the New Testament was translated from the Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament. However, more recent translations, such as the 2011 edition of the New International Version (NIV), are based on the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland/United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament. This is a critical text that takes into consideration all known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, as well as New Testament quotations from early church fathers and from ancient lectionaries.[12] Any criticism of the Westcott and Hort text, or the men themselves—and much of the criticism has been misleading and outright slander—has no relevance whatsoever to the latest edition of the New International Version and other recent translations.

Another criticism of newer translations is that some words and phrases, and even a few passages, that are included in the KJV, are absent in newer translations. These are not omissions. Rather, these words and phrases are additions in the Textus and Receptus and KJV. These additions are absent in the more ancient Greek manuscripts. Most modern translations still acknowledge the traditional additions in some way: in margin notes, in footnotes, or they are printed in a different font, etc. (More about the additional verses in the KJV here.)

The King James Version is an excellent translation, but many of the recent English translations are better. I mostly read the New Testament in Greek, but the English Bibles I use, roughly in order of preference, are the Common English Bible (CEB), the New International Version (NIV 2011), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the King James Version (KJV). Most of the other, better-known English translations are fine too.

It is most important that we read a Bible that we can understand. The New Testament was originally written in common, everyday Greek—a language that almost everyone in the Roman Empire (the world of the New Testament) could easily understand. We need modern English translations of the Bible that modern audiences can easily understand.
Endnotes

[1] There is more information about these English Bibles in Frederic G. Kenyon’s essay and on Wikipedia.


[5] “For example, a note in the margin beside Exodus 1 said the Hebrew midwives in the time of baby Moses were right to disobey the Egyptian king’s order to kill newborn baby boys. And a note beside 2 Chronicles 15 criticized King Asa for not executing his idol-worshipping mother.” Stephen M. Miller and Robert V. Huber, The Bible: A History (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2003), 178.

[6] New Testament Greek scholar Bill Mounce writes,

“For a long time Koine Greek confused many scholars. It was significantly different from Classical Greek. Some hypothesized that it was a combination of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Others attempted to explain it as a “Holy Ghost language”, meaning that God created a special language just for the Bible. But studies of Greek papyri found in Egypt over the past one hundred years have shown that this language was the language of the everyday people . . .”


[7] Before the discovery of numerous ancient documents in Egypt and elsewhere, there were very few Koine Greek writings available besides the New Testament. But now we have numerous letters, business receipts, census statements, novels, and other writings written in Koine. Today, we can compare the language of the New Testament with these other writings to see how words were used in and around the first century. Furthermore, among the discoveries were ancient manuscripts of biblical texts that were older than those used to create Erasmus Greek text that became the Textus Receptus.


[9] Erasmus was a Roman Catholic priest. He dedicated the first edition of his Greek New Testament to the Pope. I include this bit of information for those who wrongly claim that the newer English translations are unduly influenced by Roman Catholicism. (See also endnote 12.)

[10] Robert Estienne, also known as Stephanas, based his text of the New Testament on the works of Erasmus, but he also used a text known as the Codex Bezae. (This book is also known as Codex Cantabrigiensis as Beza later presented it to the University of Cambridge.)
Several scholars have observed the apparent anti-feminist tendencies of the writer of the Codex Bezae. The reviser represents the western tradition dating back to the second century, and clearly reveals the trend of thought among his contemporaries by rephrasing the received text of Acts 17:12 to read: ‘and many of the Greeks and men and women of high standing believed.’ The smoother reading serves to lessen any importance given women in Luke’s account of the conversion at Berea, and proves to be a typical alteration of Bezae in Acts.


*Acts 18:26* is another text that was altered by a scribe with “anti-feminist tendencies”. In the Codex Bezae, Aquila’s name is first and Priscilla’s second. Stephanus adopted this reading in his Greek edition. More reliable Greek manuscripts have Priscilla’s name first in *Acts 18:26*, and have “honourable women” before “men” in *Acts 17:12*.

[11] Daniel Wallace explains the difference between the Textus Receptus and the Majority Text [here](#). Wallace also notes that there is no evidence for the existence of a Byzantine-Majority text-type before the end of the fourth century.

[12] The 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland text was edited by eminent scholars [Barbara Aland](#) (Protestant), Kurt Aland (Protestant), Ioannes Karavidopoulos (Greek Orthodox), Carlo Martini (Roman Catholic), and Bruce Metzger (Protestant).

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