

Manuscripts and Translations

Changes in Language

The language of the King James Bible has endured for 400 years. Much has been written about the contribution this Bible version has made to a golden age of English literature. Many phrases and some new words which are still in common use today have come into the English language directly from the King James Bible. Why might this be the case?

There is no evidence that the translators of the King James Bible set out to achieve literary distinction and personal fame through leaving indelible marks of their undoubted scholarship and learning upon the pages of Scripture. They had no licence to interpret or paraphrase the manuscripts.

The objective of the translators was to find the most accurate English words that best rendered the meaning of the words in the manuscripts available to them. The preservation of the sense and meaning of the manuscripts was paramount. Their faithfulness to this task in producing a literal translation of the manuscripts has meant that the glory of the Word of God has triumphed, limited only by the words of the translators.

“Thee” or “You”

When the King James Bible was first published there were some complaints that some of the language was archaic and used words that were already falling into disuse from everyday speech. Yet despite this the King

James Bible has endured for four centuries.

It is sometimes said that the English of the King James Bible should be used in prayer because it is more reverent to address God using “thee”, “thy” and “thou”. If it is our personal preference, this is fine and is to be respected. However, this is not the reason it was translated this way.

These singular pronouns are used widely throughout the Bible. In the underlying Hebrew and Greek, no special form of the personal pronoun is reserved for use in relation to God. The same pronouns (Greek σέ meaning “thee” or “thou”) are used to address both God and men. For example, Acts 4:24, “*Lord thou art God*” and Matthew 26:25 Jesus addressed Judas, “*thou hast said*”.

Singular and Plural

In the Old Testament there are examples where God uses these pronouns when addressing Adam, Eve and the serpent (Genesis 3:9-14). The situation today is complicated because we have lost the distinction between singular and plural nouns and use “you”, “your” and “yours” for both. Also, today these words are used formally and informally. Inevitably, over the years language changes. For example in the 17th century the word ‘*let*’ meant, ‘*to hinder*’; today, it has come to mean the opposite.

King David and the Lord Jesus Christ recognised that accuracy and understanding of the Word of God are of vital

importance for us to please God. David was inspired by God to write words that the Lord Jesus was to understand and fulfil.

“My zeal hath consumed me, because mine enemies have forgotten thy words. Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it” (Psalm 119:139-140)

(Jesus) “...said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father’s house an house of merchandise. And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up” (John 2:16-17)

Old Testament Manuscripts

Where did the manuscripts come from that were used by the King James translators? The manuscripts used by the King James translators are dated about the tenth century AD and they had access to about seven manuscripts. The ancient Hebrew texts consist entirely of consonants. Therefore, it was the pronunciation of words that enabled the meaning to be understood. The pronunciation of Hebrew words over many centuries was finally recorded in the Middle Ages by the addition of vowel signs and accent markings on the consonants.

These markings together with marginal notes were compiled between the sixth and tenth centuries AD by Jewish scholars known as Masoretes (a word that means ‘handed down’). This marked text became known as the Masoretic Text and was known for the care and accuracy with which it was prepared and copied. It is this Hebrew text that has been accepted to be the most authoritative.



Some of the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found

The Dead Sea Scrolls

An astonishing chance discovery was made in 1947 when an Arab teenager threw a stone into the mouth of a cave and was puzzled by the sound he heard of breaking pottery. This was how the Qumran Scrolls, more popularly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, were found in caves overlooking the dried up river bed of the Wadi Qumran. The Qumran find has yielded scrolls of all the Books of the Old Testament except for the Book of Esther.

The Qumran Scrolls are 1,000 years older than the manuscripts from which the King James Bible Old Testament was translated. They date from between 150-68 BC and confirm that the message has remained consistent. The Dead Sea Scrolls confirm for us that the 1611 translators working with manuscripts only 600 years old were using accurate documents. The Word of God is unchanging and has been preserved for us.

New Testament Manuscripts

The Greek text that was used for the translation of the New Testament of the King James Bible is sometimes known as the “Textus Receptus” or the “Received Text”. In the 16th century, Erasmus put together a text based on the small number of Byzantine manu-

scripts that were available to him.

However, today there are over 5,000 manuscripts of all or part of the New Testament. Between 80% and 90% of these manuscripts are in agreement and support the Greek text which was used by the translators of the King James Bible. There are at

least four reasons why we can have confidence in the authority of the Greek text used by the translators of the King James Bible.

- ① Subsequent discoveries show a consistency in a large number of similar texts.

Sources and Texts for the New Testament

AD 33 – 100		
Originals and copies used by the 1st century Ecclesias in Palestine, Antioch, Asia & beyond.		
Byzantine Text	AD 100 – 312	Alexandrian Text
Traditional or Majority of Texts now represent 90% of all the New Testament manuscripts.	Greatest corruption of text took place in this period. (Acts 20:28-32)	Corrupters of texts: Origen mingled Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, & Ethics with the Bible text (AD185-254). And others.
AD 312 – 1453		
	Majority copies text used by Greek Orthodox Church to this present day.	Constantine ordered 50 copies of Eusebius-Origen Bible. Jerome’s Latin Vulgate AD 404 based largely on Origen’s text.
AD 1453 – 1831		
The Traditional texts after the Reformation were known as ‘Textus Receptus’ from 1633 The New Testament of these Bibles drew on these texts: Erasmus Grk.NT 1516 Tyndale NT 1525 Coverdales NT 1535 Matthews NT 1537 Great Bible NT 1539 Geneva Bible NT 1557 Bishops Bible NT 1568 Beza Gk. NT 1598 King James (AV) 1611	Majority copies text used by Churches of Reformation.	Corrupted or incomplete texts: Codex Vaticanus found in Vatican Library 1450s -origin unknown, thought to be 4th Century. Codex Sinaiticus found in a monastery, 1859 supposed to be written c.AD 320. And others.

- ② The manuscripts found come from many places spread around the Mediterranean world.
- ③ Ancient foreign language Bible versions were based on the same kind of text as used by the King James Bible translators.

For example, the Syrian speaking Christians had their own version of the Bible about 150 AD, known as the Syriac ‘Pershitta’ (meaning, the correct or simple). It was at Antioch in Syria that believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Early Latin Bible translations were well established before 250 AD when Rome began to send missionaries to the West. These Bibles were translated about 157AD and also represent what later became known as the Received Text.

- ④ There is uniformity in the manuscripts found over many centuries and across a wide geographical area, involving many copyists.

We may therefore have confidence that the original message of God’s Word has been preserved by the large number of witnesses we now have.

Text Families

By contrast, many modern Bible versions since the Revised Version of 1881 are based on fewer, older manuscripts from a more localised area. The better known of these manuscripts are the Alexandrinus, Siniaticus and Vaticanus. All are written on vellum, the first two are in the British Museum and the latter in Rome.

There are essentially two families of texts from which our Bible may have been translated (see the chart on page 7). The King James Bible is supported by the Received Text, which represents only a small number of the Byzantine

manuscripts that were discovered later. The New King James Bible is also based on the Received Text and also on the generally similar Majority Text.

Under Attack

The Apostle Paul warned the first century believers that there would be corruption of the Truth of the Gospel message and this reduced him to tears.

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:28-31).

The Biblical record was assailed from both within the Christian community and from external influences. The 2nd century Alexandrian scholar and philosopher, Origen, is reported to have said,

“The Scriptures are of little use to those who understand them as they are written”.

He treated the Word of God as if it was mainly allegory. We must listen to the warnings of the Apostle Paul and be open and honest in our reading and understanding of the Gospel message.

Peter Moore

Next: Bibles and Bible Study