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Gimme the Bible that Paul used

A look at the King James Only debate

By Eric Pement (3/87)

I confess that my natural tendency leans toward King James. A few years ago one of my great desires was to find a T-shirt inscribed with the words, "1611 -- Straight from Heaven."

But favoritism aside, the King James Version is not perfect. Some folks would argue with that statement, and many churches have divided over the "King James only" issue. In brief, the "King James only" stance asserts that no other translation is truly the Word of God.

THE BIBLE: GOD'S WORD TO MAN

In discussing in what respect the Bible -- or any translation of it -- can be the Word of God, we must distinguish between the inspiration of the text of the original manuscripts and the inspiration of the wording chosen by a translator working with another language.

The apostle Paul declares that "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). The English word "scripture" comes from the Greek word GRAPHE, meaning "that which is written." The term "is given by inspiration of God" actually comes from a single Greek word, THEOPNEUSTOS. Literally, THEOPNEUSTOS means "God-breathed" or "breathed [out] by God." The terminology used here emphasizes that the written text originated from (or out of) God. The Holy Bible is a revelation from God, not merely a collection of human insights.

While God has conveyed His message to us through human thoughts and words, nowhere does the Bible imply that the languages used in the Old and New Testaments are somehow the languages of Heaven. Hebrew and Greek are human tongues, with both the limitations and the richness that these languages possess. In giving us His word, God used two very different languages (and the thought-forms which underlie them), instead of one language only, which should protect us from the trap of ascribing perfection to any human language.

INTRODUCING THE KING JAMES VERSION

Probably few people know it, but the King James Bible we universally accept today is not an exact copy of the edition released in 1611. The Bible which circulates as the "Authorized" King James Version is actually the fourth revision of 1769. A simple way to verify this is by reading John 3:7 in your KJV. The 1611 text read as follows: "Marueile not that I saide vnto thee, Ye must be borne againe." Similarly, the spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and use of italics have been changed throughout.

In addition, the original 1611 edition contained marginal notes offering more precise or alternate translations. (For example, it indicated that "a worshiper" in Acts 19:35 is literally "the temple

keeper" in Greek.) Also, verses which had poor manuscript support were noted, such as Luke 17:36. All the marginal notes and alternate readings have been removed from modern editions of the KJV, along with the Apocrypha, the opening Dedication to James I, and a lengthy introduction from "The Translators to the Reader."

ARGUMENTS FOR THE SUPERIORITY OF THE KJV

Those who argue for the superiority of the King James Version usually stand on one of three platforms:

- (1) KJV is better because it is more memorable, popular, etc.
- (2) KJV is better because it relies on a better textbase for the NT.
- (3) KJV is better because its translation was inspired by God.

The first platform appeals to the beauty of the KJV, the felicity of its cadences and rhythms, its rigorous faithfulness to the original languages, the way the text lends itself to memorization, and to the desirability of having a single version among the English-speaking people.

There is something to be said for this viewpoint. If you can appreciate Shakespeare, you can appreciate the English of the KJV. On the other hand, there are several spots where the KJV could bear improvement. The KJV translation often confuses HADES (the realm of the dead) with GEHENNA (the punishment of fire); likewise TEKNON (child) with HUIOS (son), and DUNAMIS (power) with EXOUSIA (authority). The deity of Christ is obscured in the KJV rendering of Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1. And at several points the KJV contains interpolations where there is no corresponding text in any known Greek manuscript.

DOES THE KJV USE A BETTER TEXTBASE?

The second platform concerns the Greek textbase used by the translators of the KJV. Please note: this is strictly a debate over the best manuscripts to use in translating the New Testament. There is usually little objection to modern translations of the Old Testament, because the Hebrew (Masoretic) text used in 1611 is still considered the standard today.

Many people defend the King James because its translators relied in large measure on a printed edition of the Greek New Testament now known as the Textus Receptus (or "Received Text"). The TR can be traced back to Desiderius Erasmus. In 1516 Erasmus published the first Greek New Testament, based on half a dozen Greek manuscripts and the Latin (Vulgate) translation of the NT. Later, Stephens (1551) and Beza (1598), employing a dozen more manuscripts, still produced fundamentally similar texts. It was their texts which were used by the translators of the Authorized Version.

From the immense body of New Testament material (5,366 Greek manuscripts; over 2,200 lectionaries; over 36,000 citations from the church fathers), scholars have adopted a means of categorizing the various manuscripts. This provides assistance in determining which wording and spelling should be preferred in cases of disagreement. New Testament scholars have arranged the manuscripts into four main families (or textbases), based on similar phraseology, spelling and grammatical peculiarities, and other common features.

The Textus Receptus is derived from the Byzantine family (which represents about 95% of all Greek manuscripts). However, it does not truly represent the Byzantine textbase, mainly because the sixteenth-century scholars examined so few of these manuscripts. Most contemporary translations (RSV, NASV, NIV, etc.) rely on manuscripts from the

Alexandrian, Western, and Caesarean families in addition to the Byzantine texts. Manuscripts from these families are often more ancient, but there are fewer of them than those of the Byzantine tradition. (For a detailed study of this subject, I strongly recommend "A General Introduction to the Bible", by Norman Geisler and William Nix [Moody Press, 2nd ed., 1986].)

Before proceeding further, I should emphasize that these four text-types are not in great opposition to one another. In over 90 percent of the New Testament, readings are identical word-for-word, regardless of the family. Of the remaining ten percent, MOST of the differences between the texts are fairly irrelevant, such as calling the Lord "Christ Jesus" instead of "Jesus Christ," or putting the word "the" before a noun. Less than two percent would significantly alter the meaning of a passage, and NONE of them would contradict or alter any of the basic points of Christian doctrine. What we have, then, is a dispute concerning less than one-half of one percent of the Bible. The other 99.5% we all agree on!

IS THE KING JAMES TRANSLATION DIVINELY INSPIRED?

The third level takes us into another dimension. At this stage, we hear people saying that the English wording used by the KJV translators was chosen by God.

One way to recognize people coming from this platform is that they totally reject all other English versions of the Bible, even those which rely on the Textus Receptus, because they believe the King James translation is perfect. For example, Tyndale's translation (1535), the Bishops' Bible (1568), Young's Literal Translation of the Bible (1898), the King James II Version (1971), and the New King James Version (1982) are all based on the Textus Receptus. But a true fanatic will reject all of these translations, even if he's never seen them, because he presupposes that only the 1611 Authorized Version is true.

If you want to argue for the superiority of the Textus Receptus over the Alexandrian manuscripts, fine. That's Level 2, and we are still talking about the TEXT being the standard, while the job of the TRANSLATION is to reproduce the thoughts of the text. But in Level 3, the TRANSLATION is the standard, and if the translation doesn't agree with the text, it's because the Greek is in error. This is the OPPOSITE of Level 2. On Level 3, the Textus Receptus has mistakes in it, but the KJV translation is perfect.

One well-known defender of this view is Peter S. Ruckman. For example, in "A Christian's Handbook of Manuscript Evidence", Ruckman has a chapter entitled, "Correcting the Greek with the English." He claims, "Where the majority of Greek manuscripts stand against the A.V. 1611, put them in file 13" (p. 130). "When the Greek says one thing and the A.V. says another, throw out the Greek" (p. 137).

In Acts 19:37, every known Greek manuscript has HIEROSULOUS, "robbers of temples," which the KJV incorrectly rendered as "robbers of churches." Ruckman defends the KJV reading, saying, "Mistakes in the KJV are advanced revelation" (p. 126). In other words, the Greek has errors, but the KJV doesn't.

MOTIVATION FOR KING JAMES ONLY

The average believer might wonder how such an extreme defensiveness for the King James Version could come about. I think one of the chief reasons people are unwilling to admit even a speck of error in the King James Version is to prevent the man in the pew from being at the mercy of the "textual critic." Too often, they've heard lines like this: "Well, you

believe XYZ because it says that in your version of the Bible. But you don't know (a) the subtle meaning of the original Greek word, or (b) that we've discovered new manuscripts, and a different word was used there."

Thus, a number of people from conservative Christian persuasions have decided that "the buck is gonna stop RIGHT HERE," with the universally distributed KJV. I suspect this is the real reason for their insistence on the perfection of the King James Version.

Rather than respond by pointing to a "flawless" KJV, however, a better solution is to teach the man in the pew how to prove and defend his beliefs from Scripture. In the first place, no major Christian doctrine hinges on one or two verses. The fundamentals of the faith appear repeatedly throughout the body of Scripture, in principle and presupposition as much as in explicit statements. There should be no need to rely on one or two prooftexts to prove your point.

Second, if there is a need to go to the Greek or Hebrew, we must be willing to take the time to learn how to use study helps (lexicons, concordances, encyclopedia, interlinear Bibles, etc.). Make the effort to telephone an instructor at a Bible college or seminary to settle a dispute. Most of them are glad to answer questions from non-students, so don't be afraid to look for outside help.

Third, remember that the greatest barrier to doctrinal agreement among Christians is not caused by textual uncertainty ("what does the text say?"), but by hermeneutic and presuppositional issues ("what does it mean?"). In other words, the main reason for conflict is due to interpretation, not translation.

Finally, every major belief of Christianity can be just as easily proven from the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Version, or the New International Version, as from the King James. Any major translation is sufficiently accurate to enable a person to believe in Jesus Christ and receive the new birth through faith in Him. Moreover, most translations accurately convey the character of God, the nature of man's fall, our need for redemption, the signs of the Christian, and the foundational things we ought to do and ought to avoid to please God.

Bible scholars tell us that the accuracy of the text of the New Testament (excluding spelling variations) is greater than 98 percent. The NT is far more accurate than ANY other ancient writing. In fact, there is more evidence for the integrity of the New Testament than there is for the works of Shakespeare or any 10 other pieces of ancient literature COMBINED.

On a foundational level, we can be assured that the everlasting and incorruptible truth of God's Word has been preserved for us in the Scriptures. The real argument for inerrancy, far from being the opinions of backwoods country bumpkins, rests on the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ and verifiable historical evidence. Accurate and authoritative, the Word of God is a "lamp unto our feet" as we walk the Christian path.

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NOTE: For further reading on the King James controversy, I recommend the following: "The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism", by D. A. Carson (Baker Book House, 1979); "Demystifying the Controversy Over the Textus Receptus and the King James Version of the Bible," I.B.R.I. Research Report No. 3, by Douglas S. Chinn and Robert C. Newman (Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield, PA, 1979); and "The Truth About the King James Version Controversy", by Stewart Custer (Bob Jones University Press,

1981).

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