

The Brilliancy of the
King James
Translators
Revealed

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“The King James Bible is a masterpiece of Bible translation.”

“The King James Bible is unquestionably the most beautiful book in the world, a peerless literary masterpiece, the noblest monument of English prose, a touchstone of literary excellence.”

“The translators (of the King James Bible) have seized the very spirit and soul of the original and expressed this almost everywhere with pathos and energy. The original, from which it is taken, is alone superior to the Bible which was released by the authority of King James.”

“The Holy Scriptures, as translated in the reign of King James the First, are the noblest heritage of the Anglo-Saxon race.”

“It (the King James Bible) has seized the spirit and copied the manner of the divine originals. It is level to the understanding of the cottager, and fit to meet the eye of the critic, the poet, and the philosopher. It is the birthright of our numerous population, and has proved the means of knowledge, holiness and joy to millions; and we trust it is destined for ages yet to come, to be the glory of the rich, and the inheritance of the poor; the guide to the way-worn pilgrim, and the messenger of peace to many a dying sinner.”

Credit Given to The Triune God

To whom do we owe this literary masterpiece, excelling all that our English language has produced before or since? I submit there are three to whom we owe this marvel. First and unashamedly I give all glory to the triune God for not only breathing out the words but also preserving them. Secondly, I thank the faithful, both of the nation Israel and of the church, who loved God and kept his words. And thirdly, for the English-speaking world, I credit the King James Bible translators for the unparalleled masterpiece that we are able to hold in our hands, read with our own eyes, and ponder in our hearts.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the history of the translation, the political environment that shaped its production, or the credentials of the translators. These areas have been examined often and thoroughly and many worthwhile books have been written about these things that are indeed fascinating and enlightening. Comprehensive biographies of the translators themselves are available and give insight into the incredible team that God assembled to do His work. A reading of the historical account demonstrates

the providential circumstances that God arranged so that this work could be a lasting one, a magnificent monument that stands alone in the English language.

It is my purpose to examine the mandate given to the translators and to show, by specific example, how they were not only faithful to their commission but also how they were mindful of the importance of their work, striving beyond scholarship into the depths of unmatched literary perfection. Why was this word chosen instead of another? Why was the phrase turned this way instead of that way? Why did they brush away a previous translation in certain places and unearth new ground? Being unfamiliar with the original languages and unable to approach their scholarship, I am certain that I have overlooked many possibilities and neglected some obvious examples. However, the insight I have gained through this exercise has been incredibly rewarding and, I hope, worth sharing.

Lack of Information

Incredibly unfortunate is the reality that the translators' notes, with few exceptions, have never been found. It is certainly curious that the notes of 50 scholars, who spent several years of their lives dedicated to this most important project, meeting together to discuss the intricacies of translation numerous times, both in small companies and in the larger assembly, are lost to us. But we do have the "Rules to Be Observed in the Translation of the Bible" that were to be followed throughout the process as well as the preface in the 1611 edition which contains a message from "The Translators to the Reader." These two documents will provide the starting point into our examination of this matchless translation.

Word-For-Word Translation

The translators recognized that the purpose of any translation should be to make certain that each Word from God is reproduced "after his kind" into the language of the people. In their own words:

"Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water . . ."

In most developed languages there are three levels of speech; upper, middle and lower. The upper level is always correct according to the laws of language but, when spoken at all, can sound stilted and pretentious. The lower level is rough, containing slang, and generally of limited vocabulary. The middle tier avoids either extreme. It is interesting that the original languages, the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible, are on this middle level. For example, the Greek is the language of the streets and markets, not that of drama and poetry found in ancient Greek writings. So, by remaining decidedly faithful to the original language words, the result is a translation on the middle level, even though it was not the English spoken at the time. This quality renders it understandable to the peasant and relevant to the noble as well.

Translators Were Not Pioneers

As the translators in their respective companies, of which there were six, began their work, they fully acknowledged that they were not pioneers in the business of translating the Bible into English from the original language texts. They had before them very credible Bibles which had been faithfully translated previously. William Tyndale had completed his translation of the New Testament in 1525 and the Pentateuch in 1530. The Geneva Bible, published in 1560, contained within its pages, encyclopedic notes, maps, depictions of the temple, computations of the age of the earth, and other such “helps” that made it a special favorite of the people. The Bishops Bible was published in 1568 and was the Bible that was read aloud in the churches, making it very familiar to the people. Addressing their readers the translators stated the following:

“Truly, good Christian reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one, . . . that hath been our endeavor, that our mark.”

The First Rule

Resulting directly from this belief is the first rule the translators were to follow; **to make the “Bishop’s Bible” the basis of their work, altering it no further than fidelity to the originals required.** It is interesting that the last rule gives **permission for other translations to be consulted**, such as the Tyndale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Coverdale Bible and the Great Bible. We also know that the Douai Rheims Catholic Bible had recently been published and was also consulted. From this knowledge we can derive the procedure they were to follow. They were to **translate out of the original tongues**, compare that with former translations, and revise as necessary. This forms the basis for the comparisons that follow. If their mandate was to follow the Bishop’s Bible, comparing as well the previous English translations, any change would have to be not only warranted, but also agreed upon by the majority of the translators. Would it not be an interesting study to examine some of those changes?

Use of Marginal Notes

Another important point to consider is the use of marginal notes. It is widely known that one of the major reasons King James was receptive to a new translation was his hatred of some of the notes in the Geneva Bible; notes that, in his view, were seditious and diminished the sovereignty of the King. Also, it was not the vision of the translators to make notes that were interpretative or explanatory. However, it was agreed that there were basically three situations that would require a marginal note. The first would be when a certain word was chosen over another equally good word. The word, “or” in the margin indicates this type of situation. The translators felt very strongly that the English language would be impoverished if they were rigid in their use of words by always translating the Hebrew or Greek word with the same English word. If they had done this, there would have

been hundreds of wonderful English words that would fall out of use, eventually leading to a decrease in richness of the language.

The second situation requiring a note was when the original text was obscure or ambiguous. The translators would translate their sense of the text but then would notate the exact translation in the margin, preceded by the abbreviation “Heb.” or “Gr.” In this they differed widely from the Douai-Rheims Catholic Bible which contains no marginal notes, founded on the belief that the Bible should be completely authoritative. The KJB translators were a bit more humble in their approach by encouraging intelligent readers to make their own conclusions about a doubtful meaning.

The third situation is very helpful to all students of the Bible; the use of references from one Scripture to another. This tool not only promotes the unity and cohesiveness of the Scriptures but also enables the student to develop a fuller understanding of its truth.

Ambiguity

One other area to address is their treatment of ambiguous meanings that were often found in the original language texts. They determined to **retain the ambiguity**. I cannot help but believe that this decision was probably very difficult to abide by, as it is the tendency of all men to resolve ambiguity by interjecting their interpretations or opinions. The new versions differ in this area as they try to resolve all questions. For example, the preface to the Good News Bible states that an English translation should be natural, clear, simple and unambiguous. Eugene Nida, a guru of modern translation theory says the following: “We should assume that [the writers of the Bible] intended one meaning and one meaning only.” The fallacies in this statement are obvious to anyone who has any knowledge of holy things. First of all, there were no “writers” of the Bible, only recorders, and secondly, to limit God to one meaning is just as ridiculous as to limit Him to one dimension. Contrary to popular thought, here are some valid reasons for retaining the ambiguity found in the original language tests:

1. If a translation consistently chooses an interpretation from among several possibilities, the result is not a reliable text but rather, a text of possible interpretations; **a hypothetical text**.
2. Often times the ambiguity itself purposely enhances the text by expanding the thought. Those who resolve the ambiguities see the least in the text.
3. The language of the Bible, including Jesus’ communication with others, rested on “delayed-action” insight, requiring pondering over, discussion, and study. Explicit analytical language tends to stifle reflection.
4. The divinely determined ambiguity in the text is for all generations and all cultures. Culturally adapted interpretations would certainly interfere with its eternity.

The Brilliancy of the King James Translators Revealed

The examples that follow were specifically chosen for their variability. Many more examples could have been cited for each area of discussion, but as a general overview, these will suffice to show the diligence and care exercised to make a most superior translation.

Example # 1

Mark 6:11

Verily I say unto you, It shall be **more tolerable** for Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city.

BB, Gen, Tyn: **easier**

Six times, in contrast to previous English translations, the KJB translators chose “more tolerable” instead of “easier.” A different Greek word is translated “easier” in:

Matthew 9:5

For whether is **easier**, to say, *Thy sins be forgiven thee*; or to say, Arise, and walk?

Comment: In this example, the translators were diligent to make a distinction between two different Greek words.

Example #2

2 Cor. 8:15

As it is written, He that *had gathered* much **had nothing over**; and he that *had gathered* little **had no lack**.

BB: He that had much, **had not the more aboundance**, and he that had litle, **had not the lesse**.

The note in the margin references Ex. 16:18 where both the BB and the KJB read the same;

Exodus 16:18

he that gathered much **had nothing over**, and he that gathered little **had no lack**;

Comment: The translators often connected the Old and New Testaments through the same word choices.

Example #3

2 Cor. 9:6

He which **soweth sparingly** shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth **bountifully** shall reap also **bountifully**.

BB: he which **soweth litle**, shall reape litle: and he that soweth in geuyng largely and freely, shall reape plenteouslie.

Geneva: that he which **soweth sparingly**, shall reape also sparingly, and hee that soweth liberally, shall reape also liberally.

Comment: The translators must have preferred the alliteration in “soweth sparingly” and so adopted the Geneva reading for the first phrase. The question is, why did they not adopt the Geneva for the whole reading? Why change “liberally” to “bountifully”?

The answer is found in the previous verse:

Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren, that they would go before unto you, and make up beforehand your **bounty**, whereof ye had notice before, that the same might be ready, as *a matter of bounty*, and not as *of covetousness*.

They were mindful of surrounding verses and sought to tie them together.

Example #4

2 Cor. 8:4

. . . that we would **receive** the gift, and **take upon us** the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.

BB: . . . that we woulde **receaeue this grace and societie** of the ministerie to ye saintes **Geneva** has the same sense. (Societie is another word for fellowship.)

Comment: In the BB, both grace and societie are objects of the same verb. This change is attributed to Andrew Downes, a brilliant Greek scholar, who noted that the Gr. verb (translated receive) is passive and cannot be linked with fellowship, which requires an active verb. Notice the addition in italics of the second verb linked to “fellowship.”

Example #5

1 Peter 2:9

But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should **shew forth the praises** of him who hath called you . . .

The BB, Geneva, Tyndale and even back to Wycliffe, have “virtues” instead of “praises.”

Comment: Once again, Andrew Downes argued against following all previous English translations. He maintained that the verb translated “shew forth” means more than tell or publish but in a finer sense means “to let out something that one has within.” Therefore, we have praises of him within, not necessarily virtues of him.

As if that were not enough for the change, he also pointed out that this verse echoes:

Isaiah 43:21

This people have I formed for myself; **they shall shew forth my praise.**

The word “virtue” is not found in the Old Testament. Again the translators have forged a link between the Old Testament and the New.

But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, **a peculiar people**; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you . . .

The phrase “peculiar people” is not unique to the KJB but unlike the Bishops Bible and the Geneva, it is also found in the Old Testament. Notice the following:

Deut. 14:2

for thou *art* an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a **peculiar people** unto himself, above all the nations that *are* upon the earth.

Comment: In the Old Testament, the BB uses the phrase, “**severall people**” which means, separate; distinct. The Geneva uses the phrase, “**precious people.**” While the word chosen for the KJB, “peculiar,” means these things, it also has the connotation of belonging to, or the exclusive property of. The King James translators were masters of word choice.

Example #6

1 Chron. 11:10

These also *are* the chief of the **mighty men** whom David had, who strengthened themselves with him in his kingdom,

The Old Testament vividly paints a picture of David and his “mighty men” as they transverse the land, hiding from King Saul and fighting against the enemies of Israel. What may not be so well remembered is that this phrase, “**mighty men**” is used in 71 verses in our Bible. The previous translations are not so repetitive, using phrases such as great men, men of might, strong men, worthies, nobles, principal men, men of power, valiant men and men of war.

Comment: There are certain phrases that are part of every Bible readers’ soul; phrases that, when read elsewhere, are only echoes of the Book that lives within them. “And it came to pass” is one of these phrases that our Bible repeats more than any other English translation. “**Mighty men**” is another.

Example #7

1 Peter 1:23

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, **which** liveth and abideth for ever.

Geneva: Being borne anewe, not of mortall seede, but of immortall, by the woorde of God, **who** liueth and endureth for euer.

Comment: This verse is very dear to those of us who defend the preservation of the Words of God. In the Greek construction, “liveth and abideth” could modify the noun, “word” or “God.” The Bishops used the word, “which,” while both the Geneva and the Douai-Rheims used “who.” However, there is really no question if we solve it by context for verse 25 clearly says, “But the word of God endureth forever.” This is of utmost importance to the doctrine of preservation. Not surprisingly, the new versions have mutilated this verse.

Example #8

1 Peter 3:9

Not rendering evil for evil, or **railing for railing**: but contrariwise blessing;

The other English translations say **rebuke for rebuke**. So, what is “railing” and why change the previous translations? Railing means to censure with contempt or derision, using harsh and abusive language. (Here the Wycliffe version may be closer to the meaning, for it reads, cursing for cursing.) Rebuke is a much less intense word; in fact, sometimes rebuke is a good thing:

Proverbs 24:25

But to them that rebuke *him* shall be delight, and a good blessing shall come upon them.

Proverbs 9:8

. . .rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.

Comment: This example shows two convictions: The translators desire to choose a word that gives the precise meaning of the original while also maintaining the richness of the English language.

Example #9

1 Peter 5:5

. . . Yea, all *of you* be subject one to another, and **be clothed with humility**:

BB and Geneva: **decke your selues inwardly in lowlynes of mynde**:

The Greek word found here does not occur anywhere else and it refers to the apron of a slave. Thus, the outward manner is spoken of here, not the inner.

Comment: This is again an example of precise translation and not reading into the text. However, this example also brings out another characteristic of the KJB and that is its succinctness or conciseness. The words in the whole translation are relatively few and they are short. In comparison, Shakespeare wrote at about the same time as our translation was made, and he used about 15,000 to 20,000 words in his works. The whole KJB uses only about 6,000 words. The above verse depicts this characteristic, saying the same in 4 words that it took both the Bishops and Geneva 8 words to say.

Example #10

In the book of Deuteronomy, the spiritually aware King James Translators translated the word “Rock” with a capital letter 5 times. This was a complete departure from all previous versions which did not translate the Hebrew word tsoor as “rock” in these verses at all. For example:

Deut. 32:4

*He is **the Rock**, his work is perfect:*

BB: Perfect is the worke of the **most mightie God**,

Geneva: Perfect is the worke of the **mighty God**:

Deut. 32:18

Of **the Rock** *that* begat thee thou art unmindful,

BB: Of **God** that begat thee thou art vnmyndfull,

Geneva: Thou hast forgotten **the mightie God** *that* begate thee,

Deut. 32:30

. . . except **their Rock** had sold them, and the LORD had shut them up?

BB: except **their maker** had solde them, and except the Lorde had shut them vp?

Geneva: except **their strong God** had sold them, & the Lord had shut them vp?

Comment: These translations are all over the place, yet all of them read the same in the defining verse in the New Testament as follows:

1 Cor. 10:4

And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: **and that Rock was Christ.**

The translators were ingenious in naming the Rock of the Old Testament as the Christ of the New. Is there any doubt that they were not only scholarly geniuses but spiritual giants as well?

Example #11

John 10:15

. . . and I **lay down my life** for the sheep.

John 15:13

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man **lay down his life** for his friends.

BB: **bestowe his life** (for his friends) but **geue my life** (for the sheep).

Geneva: **bestoweth his life** (for his friends) but **lay downe my life** (for the sheep).

Comment: In case there was any question as to what constituted “agape” love, the KJB translators erased all doubt by using the exact same words in both situations. There was a story in the news recently that showed this kind of love. One of our brave soldiers received the Medal of Honor posthumously for covering a live grenade with his body, thus saving his fellow soldiers. There is no greater love.

Example #12

1 Tim. 5:10

. . . if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have **relieved the afflicted**, if she have diligently followed every good work.

BB and Geneva: . . . yf she haue washed the saintes feete, yf she haue **ministred vnto them that were in aduersitie**,

Comment: Another example of simplicity and succinctness, using half as many words and half as many syllables. (If you were memorizing this verse, which translation would you appreciate?)

Example #13

1 Tim. 4:1

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to **seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils**;

BB and Geneva: . . . **spirits of error, and doctrines of deuils**,

Comment: This Greek word, here translated “seducing” is used only 4 other times where it is translated “deceiver (s).” While “deceiving spirits” would have given the same sense, which “spirits of error” doesn’t quite convey, the translators found a word that has the added quality of being alliterative.

Example #14

Luke 22:45

And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them **sleeping for sorrow**,

BB, Geneva, Wycliffe: **slepyng for heauynesse**,
Tyndale: **slepinge for sorowe**

Comment: The translators chose the alliterative translation.

Example #15

Luke 2:13

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the **heavenly host** praising God, and saying,

BB, Geneva, Tyndale: **heauenly souldiers**
Douai-Rheims: **heavenly army**
Wycliffe: **heuenli knyythod**

Comment: Alliteration

Example #16

Luke 2:14

Glory to God **in the highest**, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

BB and Tyndale: Glorie to God **on hye**
Geneva: Glorie to God **in the high heauens**
Wycliffe: Glorie be **in the hiyeste thingis** to God

There are three possible meanings here: The Bishops and Tyndale put God in a place of prominence, as Naboth was set “on high” at the feast. The Geneva places God up in heaven while Wycliffe places God worthy of the highest things. A view not reflected here is that God could be **among** the highest, i.e. with the angels and the heavenly host. Which is correct?

Comment: Here we have an example of the character of the translators themselves. When ambiguity was found in the original language texts, it was never their intention to interpret the Scriptures. This is one of the downfalls of our modern versions. The modern Bible translators consider it a weakness in translating if questions are not resolved. The KJB translators were brilliant in their humble approach by choosing a phrase that would encompass all possibilities.

Example #17

Proverbs 23:31

Look not thou upon **the wine** when it is red, when it giveth **his** colour in the cup,

Proverbs 26:14

As **the door** turneth upon **his** hinges, so *doth* the slothful upon his bed.

In the above examples, modern English would read “its” rather than “his.” But, in 1611 the word “its” used as a possessive was just coming into vogue. Shakespeare(1564-1616) used it 10 times in this voluminous writings, but only 10. It was beginning to be heard on the street but only at the lower level.

Philip. 4:6

Be **careful** for nothing;

In 1611, the word “anxious” or “anxiety” was coming into general usage at the upper level of speech and could have been judiciously used here.

Comment: The translators were not interested in showing off their prowess in the language arts and resisted innovation. In this they remained faithful to the mandate given them.

Example #18

1 Peter 1:11

Searching **what, or what manner of time** the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.

BB, Geneva, Tyndale: Searchyng **when or at what tyme**

Comment: The previous translations did not reveal all that was in this thought. “When” and “at what time” means the same thing but the Greek word translated “manner” means character or quality. So, the correct rendering would ask, what was the character of the time when Christ would suffer. The King James Translators were masters of the Greek language.

Example #19

1 Peter 1:12

Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you **with** the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.

BB, Geneva, Tyndale, Wycliffe: **by** the Holy Ghost

Comment: It has often been said that the Bible is a book of prepositions. The littlest of words can have a profound effect upon the meaning. If the gospel is preached **by** the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost is either the agent or the facilitator. If the gospel is preached **with** the Holy Ghost, it enlarges the possibilities as the Holy Ghost could also be an accompaniment. By choosing “with” there is also the possibility that they preached the gospel **and** also preached the Holy Ghost. The translators chose the most inclusive of the options.

Example #20

1 Peter 3:18

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened **by** the Spirit:

BB: but was quickened **in** the spirite.

Tyndale: but was quyckened **in** the sprete.

Wycliffe: but maad quik **in** spirit.

Comment: This is an example of a preposition having profound doctrinal significance. Although the Greek word may be translated either way, the translators used every opportunity to squelch heresy. Heretical cults throughout history have questioned the composition of the body of Christ. Some believed the flesh to be evil; therefore He could not have had a body of flesh. Others held that Jesus and Christ were distinct; Jesus was just an ordinary man and He was only Christ from His baptism to His crucifixion. He died as an ordinary man. The assertion that He was “quickened **in** the spirit,” really says that only His divine nature was “made alive.” Changing the preposition and capitalizing “Spirit” leaves no doubt as to His physical resurrection.

Example #21

Hebrews 10:12

But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins **for ever**, sat down on the right hand of God;

BB: But this man, after he hath offered one sacrifice for sinnes, is sit downe **for euer** on the ryght hande of God:

The previous translations agreed with the Bishop’s Bible by putting the words “for ever” with the second phrase.

Comment: Examining the context of the passage, including the previous verse which contrasts the continual sacrifices performed by the priests, it was determined to place these words with the first phrase, leaving no doubt as to the effectiveness of the sacrifice. The translators reinforced orthodox doctrine whenever possible.

Example #22

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of wisdom: and the **knowledge of the holy** *is* understanding.

BB and Geneva: knowledge of the holy things

Comment: The Bible, if faithfully translated, often times will be its own dictionary. Here we have the definition of “understanding.” While it is true that knowledge of “holy things” includes holy nations, holy place, holy water, holy people, holy temple, i.e. “holy things,” the Hebrew word also refers to the Holy One (of Israel). So, the complete definition of “understanding” is “knowledge of the holy (things and One), a meaning brilliantly retained by the translators.

Example #23

Genesis 22:8

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide **himself** a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

BB My God wyll prouide a beast
Geneva God will prouide him a lambe
Tyndale God wyll prouyde him a shepe
Wycliffe God schal puruey to hym the beeste

Comment: It is appropriate to end this list of various examples of scholarly brilliance and spiritual greatness with one that epitomizes the latter. Indeed, if there were no other examples at all, this one alone, found in the first book of the Bible, but clearly anticipating the coming Saviour of the New Testament, touches deeply the heart of every believer. I am struck with awe and wonder at God providing Himself a sacrifice for me. With tears in my eyes, I say “Amen.”