

The KJV-NIV Controversy

The Bible that God gave us are the original manuscripts – the original autographs, written and collated over some 1500 years by various people. Through time, these originals are lost. **A key point is to remember that God knows this will happen.**

Many copies of the originals have been found. Obviously copies suffer from defects. The reconstruction of the Hebrew and Greek texts to as close to the original as possible is the task of textual criticism.

Bible translators of every age do their best with the most accurate reconstructed text they can lay their hands on. Herein lies the difficulty as there are numerous minor textual variations, as one would expect. **God knows this.** No single variant, however, overturns any important Christian doctrine or precept. We need not feel discouraged about this. The infallible God, who has chosen fallible creatures to record His message on perishable materials, will ensure that what He wants to reveal will be preserved.

The question becomes : “ Which is the most reliable reconstructed text from which one may translate with confidence ?”

Seen in this light, the KJV is not the original Word of God. It was a translation of 1611 AD based on what were thought to be the best manuscripts of the time. The KJV should not be treated as if it were the final word, as if it were produced from the very autographs themselves. There are verses in the New Testament of the KJV that appear to have been omitted in a modern or later version, e.g. the NIV. This is due to the availability of better manuscripts. It is not because such omissions or additions are without reason or mischievous or subversive of orthodox Christian doctrine. It only appears so **when judged by the translation called the KJV.**

Is this fear justified ? Some will reply, yes. Let’s examine the evidence.

The Evidence

We may be surprised to know that the excessive adulation of the KJV by a segment of the Christian church is not shared by the translators of the KJV. The KJV translators themselves do not support the defining and absolute accuracy **which others attribute to their translation.** Surely, we ought to temper our view of the KJV’s absolute accuracy, or, indeed, that of any other translation of the Scriptures.

Let’s have a look at the original preface of the KJV entitled : “The Translators to the Reader “:

“ We do not deny, nay we affirm and avow, that the meanest (i.e. most humble) translation of the Bible in English . . containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God. As the King’s speech, which he uttereth in Parliament, being translated into French, Dutch, Italian, and Latin, is still the King’s speech, though it be not interpreted by every Translator with the like grace, nor peradventure so fitly for phrase, nor so expressly for sense, everywhere.”

Next, the preface dealt with marginal notes of the KJV. Marginal notes give alternate readings **because** of uncertainty of the true text. Now, with regard to

marginal readings this is what the translators of the KJV had to say: Note the humility of tone and substance.:

“ Now in such a case, doth not a margin do well to admonish the Reader to seek further, and not to conclude or dogmatize upon this or that peremptorily ? For as it is the fault of incredulity, to doubt of those things that are evident: so to determine of such things as the Spirit of God hath left (even in the judgement of the judicious) questionable, can be no less than presumption. Therefore as Saint Augustine saith, that variety of Translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense of Scripture: so diversity of signification and sense in the margin, where the text is not so clear, must needs do good, yea, is necessary, as we are persuaded.”

Revisions of the KJV

The Bible is a translation from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek. No matter how good a text there is room for improvement. For the New Testament some contend that the underlying Greek text of the KJV is the only one to use. Herein lies the controversy. The history of this particular text – Received Text- and the opinions of the KJV translators (as we have read above) do not support that view.

The KJV of 1611 was revised in 1629, 1638, 1653, 1701, 1762, 1769 and latterly in 1881. Was it wrong to carry out all those revisions if the first translation was the best and only acceptable one ?

The KJV of 1611 itself was only a **revision of the Bishop’s Bible**. King James I gave specific instructions that the 57 translators should follow the text of the **Bishop’s Bible** unless they found the other translations available at the time – that of of Tyndale, Matthew, Whitchurche and Geneva Bibles - more closely agreed with the original text.

Consider some of the changes (in bold) the KJV made in the current edition that differ from the text of the 1611 edition.

Matthew 16 : 16

“ And Simon Peter answered, and said, Thou art Christ the son of the living God. “ (1611)

“ And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art **the** Christ, the Son of the living God “(now)

1 John 5 : 12

“ He that hath the Son, hath life, and he that hath not the Son, hath not life.” (1611)

“ He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son **of God**, hath not life.”(now)

Why were such changes made, if better texts have not prompted them?

With this background let us now look at the verses from the NIV

I presume there must be good reasons why omissions and changes have been made to certain verses.

1 Let us look at **Matthew 18 : 11**, “ **For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost ”**

This verse is omitted in the NIV. However, this verse, though not in the main body of the English text, is given as a marginal reading in the NIV. If there is a

plot by the NIV translators to undermine the importance of this verse it is hard to understand why the NIV keeps **Luke 19 : 10** which says essentially the same thing:

“ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

2 Next, we have **Luke 9 : 56**. The marginal reading gives the full reading of both **verses 55 and 56** as found in the KJV.

3 **Colossians 1 : 14** The phrase **“ through his blood “** is missing in the NIV. There is a reason for this. According to the United Bible Society, the earliest Greek text that cites this phrase is from the 9th century, and the earliest church Father to cite it is from the late 4th century. It is missing from the majority of Greek manuscripts.

Please note, however, that the NIV speaks unambiguously of **“ the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect “** **1 Peter 1 : 19**.

The blood of our Lord Jesus is highlighted in **Matthew 26 : 28, Romans 3 : 25, Ephesians 1 : 7, Revelation 1 : 5, 5 : 9, 7 : 14, 12 : 11**, to give a few examples.

4 **Luke 2 : 33** The NIV use of **“ father “** instead of **“ Joseph “** with reference to Jesus is not a denial of our Lord's virgin birth. Joseph is Jesus' earthly father. Even the KJV admits the fact because in **Luke 2 : 48** (KJV) we read: **“ And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us ? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.”**

Moreover, **Luke 2 : 41** (KJV) refers to Joseph and Mary as **“ his parents “**.

5 **Revelation 11 : 17** **“ art to come “** of this verse in the KJV is omitted by the NIV. But **Revelation 1 : 8** proclaims loud and clear: **“ I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, “ who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”**

Then there are the following other verses from **Revelation : 2 : 5** **“ I will come to you “**, **2 : 16** **“ I will soon come to you “**, **2 : 25** **“ hold on to what you have until I come “**, **3 : 3** **“ I will come like a thief “**, **3 : 11** **“ I am coming soon “**

All these verses tell us He is coming.

No doctrine is built on an isolated verse or two. Changes in the translations are such as have been thought necessary. These changes have not **“ diminished, distorted, diluted or deleted “** any essential article of faith when the whole Bible is used as a basis for formulating doctrine.

The Use of the OT by the NT

Finally, I have always been struck by the use of the OT by NT writers.

They show a clear preference for the use of the **Septuagint (LXX)** over the **Masoretic** text. The Masoretic text is the basis of the KJV and therefore supposedly sacrosanct. The Dead Sea scrolls have shown how reliably the Masoretes copied whatever Hebrew OT texts were available to them. They made their copies from the 5th to the 9th or 10th centuries after Christ. On the other hand, the Septuagint was the OT translated into Greek for the benefit of Jews in Egypt who could not read Hebrew. The text from which the LXX was

translated was some form of Hebrew text in popular use in the 3rd and 2nd centuries before Christ.

The reason for my amazement is this. The LXX (which, may I remind you, was a translated ' popular ' work for the masses) differs from the Masoretic text in hundreds of places. Many of these variants were due, no doubt, to editing and copyist errors. **Yet this was the text Jesus and the NT writers quoted from extensively.**

An example: when Christ condemns the Pharisees He says, “ **This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me, Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men** “ **Mark 7 : 6, 7**

The source of this quotation is **Isaiah 29 : 13**, which in the KJV reads “ **Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men** “.

Now compare the KJV verse with that of the Septuagint, which is: “ **This people draw nigh to me with their mouth, and they honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me: but in vain do they worship me, teaching the commandments and doctrines of men.**”

Obviously, the Lord had chosen to quote from the Septuagint. It was the popular version of the OT in use. Was it right of Him to do this, if the Masoretic text was the one and only text to quote from ? Should He have known better than to use something ' less inspired ' (and possibly in error because it was not the official ' inspired ' text)? .Furthermore, He must have known that His words would be transmitted in the NT yet to come. Would He risk stumbling His followers, when they become aware that he was quoting from the Septuagint rather than the ' inspired ' Masoretic text ?

There are many other examples one could give.

Closing remarks

We all believe in the **plenary inspiration of Scripture.**

The very words of the original authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

No one can access these original autographs now. **That is an unarguable fact of life.** All we can do now is to reconstruct a text that is as close to the original as possible. For this purpose God has provided skilled men and women. He has preserved His Word in such a way that accords with His integrity as a God who has granted free-will to man.

Scholars are, in the main, learned and devout Christians.who labour in love for the church of God. I am a realist. What if some men will try to alter the text for unworthy and even evil motives? It is possible that some scholars have their own agenda and tailor the text to suit their theological leanings. Did not Paul speak of false brethren ? They may have influenced the reconstruction of the Hebrew and Greek texts and perhaps the translation of that text. In the divine providence God has provided checks and balances. Neither textual recovery nor translation is the work of one man, but of teams.

The purpose of this essay is not about translation but about the texts from which translations are made.

- 1 **The consensus is that the texts used today for translation are reliable and accurate. These are the United Bible Society (UBS), Nestle-Aland (NA), or the Majority texts, or some eclectic text based on them.**
- 2 **It has yet to be shown that any text that is used for translational work today is so corrupted that we have difficulty deriving the orthodox Christian faith from them.**
- 3 **Alternatively, it has to be shown that these minor differences among modern texts have been capitalised on by unscrupulous men, unchallenged, to the detriment of the church.**

God preserves His Word for every generation of the faithful to use so that the missionary enterprise and the building up of His people will go on.

For some Christians the preservation of the purity of the Word can mean **only** using those texts behind the KJV. Our understanding and defence of the doctrine of **plenary inspiration** needs to take into account:

- What we learn of how the Lord Jesus and the writers of the NT used the OT scriptures in their preaching and writing. That is, their frequent use of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which we call the Septuagint, rather than the canonical Masoretic Hebrew text.
- The fact that translations into the world's many languages have been blessed by our Lord for saving people. It will be enlightening for Christians to have a look at the handbooks of instruction for these translators to appreciate the breadth of expressions allowable to them when they translate from, say, the Hebrew or Greek texts of the UBS into a language other than English. Dare anyone say that these versions used so effectively on the mission field are less inspired by the Holy Spirit than the UBS or NA texts from which they derive ?

The stand that the KJV is the only acceptable English translation, or that the KJV in English is divinely inspired in its very choice of words, is not logical seeing that the KJV itself has undergone several revisions. When such a belief becomes touted as the badge of Christian orthodoxy, displacing Christian virtues such as wisdom and unity, the consequences are dire indeed. The church is embroiled in an unprofitable conflict that sows bitterness, saps its energy and hinders its missionary tasks. Is that what we want in these closing days of the harvest ?

We should concentrate on being better interpreters and teachers of God's Word, whether we are handed a Bible in English or any other language. That is how God's people are fed. That was the opinion of the translators of our beloved KJV.

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