

Dear Friends,

When I was in Huntington Beach at Wycliffe head quarters, I saw an old Bible in a display case: a 1640 copy of the King James translation with the original preface "To the Reader"(s) by the King James translators. It is a shame that this preface is not now printed in most KJV Bibles. From it we can see what they might have thought concerning the present debate on modern Bible translation.

There are some lines in this preface that have become famous. Here is my favorite of them all, with a slight adaptation to present-day English:

Translation is that which 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 this preface, the KJV translators repeatedly state that translation is not an exact art, and that therefore any translation can be improved. They give much documentation to show that the church in earlier times did a lot of translation. Therefore, it was OK that they were doing yet another.

Please note carefully what they say about the Septuagint (referring to the 70 Jewish translators of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. This was the translation of the Old Testament that was in common use during the Apostles' day.) They point out that the Apostles used it, even though that it differed in some places when compared to the original Hebrew. They go on to recommend translation of the Old Testament "out of the very fountains themselves," that is, from the Hebrew. Note that the church *could* have said, "The Septuagint was good enough for Peter and Paul, so it is good enough for me." (Some people make a joke of saying that about the KJV, but that is just a joke. It is *true* about the Septuagint!) The church *did not* choose to say that the Septuagint was the text received and used by the Apostles, therefore we should use only that from now on. The church decided it was better to go back to as close to the original "fountains" as they could get.

That is why I think the KJV translators would be shocked at what the people are saying about the Textus Receptus, the text Greek text *they* (the KJV translators) used in translating. (Yes, God has preserved His Word for all believers, but He hasn't done it the way the KJV Only people are saying. Anyway, if God was trying to work only through the Textus Receptus, why did He *NOT* give that same text to other countries? Why are English speaking countries to be singled out as special?) We have texts that are much, much closer to the date of the originals than the KJV translators possessed. On page 8, they state that they used as many resources as they had available, including earlier translations into English and other languages. Surely they would not criticize us for using all the many resources we now have available. (I think that they would be a bit envious of our modern tools. My little 2.9 pound computer has 8 versions of the New Testament (two in Indonesian, one a back translation of Berik, the closest language to Orya), 5 of the Old, the Greek NT with grammatical parsing and word-for-word translation, and when I click on a Greek word, the lexicon comes up giving complete information, often discussing other verses where the same word is used.)

In the early 1600's King James translators were working against a ban on translation imposed by the church of that day, so a good portion of the preface is a justification of the need for this, their new version. I especially like their comparison with secular books:

How many books of profane learning have been gone over again and again, by the same translators, (and) by others? ...Now if this cost may be bestowed upon the gourd, which affordeth us a little shade, and which today flourisheth, but tomorrow is cut downe; what may we bestow, nay, what ought we not to bestow upon the Vine, the fruit whereof maketh glad the conscience of man, and the stem whereof abideth forever?

The conclusion is clear: If it is OK to have many translations of the Iliad and the Odyssey, it is fine, in

fact—more than fine, to have many translations of the Word of God. Rather than devaluing it, it exalts it.

The KJV translators saw value in all honest translations:

...we do not deny, nay we affirm and avow, that the very meanest (humble, lowly) translation of the Bible in English, set forth by men of our profession (profession meaning “beliefs” here, rather than “occupation”) ... containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God.

It is clear from the above that the KJV translators would embrace all serious translations as the word of God, because they believed,
as St. Augustine saith, that variety of Translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense of the Scriptures.

Note also the realistic view that all translations are imperfect and we should strive to improve them:

No cause therefore why the word translated should be denied to be the word, ...notwithstanding that some imperfections and blemishes may be noted in the setting forth of it.

We see in the preface how humble the KJV translators were. It is clear that the task of translating drove them to prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit, because translating is a difficult task (but ever so rewarding). It seems that God didn't want to make it easy, lest we trust in ourselves.

It hath pleased God in his divine providence, here and there to scatter words and sentences of that(/such) difficulty and doubtfulness, not in doctrinal points that concern salvation (for in such it hath been vouched that the Scriptures are plain) but in matters of less moment (/importance).

This has been my experience also. When we talk of the discrepancies of various Greek texts and of difficult passages that are open to varying interpretations, it is almost always concerning some *fine point*. God has made certain that the core of the gospel is always plain. He has indeed preserved his Word for all believers.

The KJV translators make another interesting point about passages where a number of different interpretations are possible: (In my paraphrase—)

Just as it is being unfaithful to doubt the things that have been made perfectly clear, so it is also presumptuous to make a black-and-white judgement about something that the Holy Spirit has left questionable or open to various interpretations.

A common misunderstanding about translation is that if a word is translated in one place as X, then it should be translated everywhere as X. But it just doesn't work that way, because in every language, many words possess more than one meaning, and the range of meanings for one word in one language will not match the range of meaning for a similar word in the next language. The KJV translators struggled with this too:

...we have not tied ourselves to a uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words (identical wording), as some peragventure would wish that we had done.

...there are some words that are not of the same sense everywhere.

Still they did the best they could according to their “conscience” and “duty”, and their conclusion is as follows:

For is the kingdom of God become words or syllables? Why should we be in bondage to them if we may be free, (I will paraphrase from here on—) Why should we for consistency's sake use a bad fit in translation, when we could (by allowing for different senses of words) translate in a fitting manner?

In the preface the translators say they faced pressure from some who didn't want certain words with

ecclesiastical overtones to be used. They decided to go ahead and use words like “baptize” instead of “wash.” But they *did* avoid using any words that were not readily understandable, especially those that would make the translation sound sanctimonious or mysterious. They labeled such terms as churchy “obscurities” and words that “darken the sense.” Making the translation *understandable* was their main goal:

But we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, as in the language of *Canan*, that it may be understood even of the very vulgar (simple common folk).

What would they say today, if they could come and visit us and see how much the King's English has changed? If they talked to the ordinary man on the street, I think they would realize that their translation now sounds quite *sanctimonious* and *mysterious* to today's audience. Because of this it can easily be wrongly interpreted. For these reasons, I feel the KJV translators would lead the cause to get an understandable translation into peoples' hands, because it is clear they cared about the souls of the lost. And I know you have this same concern also!

May God guide us all to a right understanding of these issues!

Phil

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