

The King James Version of the Bible

Editor's Note:

In this article, the first in a series of three, we focus on the King James Version of the Bible. In the next article we will examine modern Bible versions.

In 2011 the King James Version of the Bible celebrated its 400th birthday! It is the all-time best seller in the English language and after four centuries is still loved and embraced by thousands of people. No other book in English history can lay claim to such longevity and popularity. It is completely unprecedented!

Why would a Bible version, one of perhaps half a dozen English versions available at the time of its first publication, skyrocket to such fame and popularity while other popular versions available at the time have long since been relegated to the dustbins of history? There are many reasons.

First, while it is largely based on earlier translations, it is a piece of scholarly triumph. Diligently compared to more Greek and Hebrew manuscripts than any other version, it is an excellent literal translation of the text that, for reasons we will discuss later, stands as an unmatched accomplishment even to the present day.

Second, while realizing the difficulty of publishing a Bible without any translational notes,¹ King James Version translators still felt strongly that the text should largely be allowed to speak for itself. This also included leaving ambiguous sections of the Greek ambiguous in English. They well understood that if they were to interpret the Greek for their readers, it would close off the possibility of the readers interpreting the text for themselves. Many times when the King James Version is accused of being “hard to understand,” it is because the Greek is the same. While it is nice to have someone “tell you what it means,” that is their opinion, a dangerous thing to insert into the text.

Thirdly, and just as important as the other two, the King James Version translators were scholars of the English language. They worked very hard to make the English flow smoothly, be easy to read, and have a pleasing literary style. This is the reason that the King James Version is still indisputably a triumph of English literature. It flows off the tongue like no other version in existence. As a matter of fact, the translators read each section aloud to test its suitability for preaching!

So is there anything wrong with the King James Version of the Bible? There are a few tiny translation quibbles. but there is only one real problem with the King James Version. It has been too successful! After four hundred years of use, we are finally reaching the breaking point of language metamorphosis. Considering how much languages change over the centuries, it is really a wonder that we can still understand the King James Version at all! If it weren't for type-style updates and spelling standardization, many of us would despair of even reading it. As it is, even having grown up familiar with many of the archaic terms, many of us think we understand Elizabethan English better than we really do.

Let me try you with a few examples:

1. What is the meaning of the word *communicate* as used in the New Testament? (Hint: It does not mean to speak.)
2. What did *meat* mean in the 1600's?
3. Corn is still used in Britain today to mean _____?
4. Is *rereward* really a double reward?
5. What did *engines* mean before motors were invented?
6. What does *whales* mean as used in the Bible? (Hint: A careful reading of Ezekiel 32 may help.)
7. What does *imagination* mean in Deuteronomy 29:19?
8. What archaic meaning of *rooms* is used in Luke 14?
9. Since the modern meaning of patience, "the capacity for waiting" does not apply to the phrase "run with patience," what archaic meaning of patience was intended in Hebrews 12:1?
10. How were the words *thee*, *thou*, *thy*, and *thine* used in the 17th century?
11. How was the meaning of *amazed* different in Elizabethan England than it is in modern America?
12. What is the meaning of the archaic word *anon*?
13. What was the old definition of *leasing* as used in Psalms 4 and 5?
14. If the word *carriage* does not refer to a wheeled vehicle in the Bible, to what does it refer?
15. And two of my personal favorites: What is the archaic definition of *nephews*? (See 1 Timothy 5:4).
16. What does the word *wounds* mean in Proverbs 18:8?

17. And this is only a very small sampling of the archaic, obsolete, and dialectal words retained in the King James Version! Since modern versions excel at the usage of modern English, is it finally time for us to ditch the old King James and turn to a more modern translation of the Bible? Why or why not? In the next section we will turn our attention to the modern versions to try to help us answer this question.

Answers

1. The 1611 King James did include some translation notes that the translators felt were indispensable. However, the copious use of interpretive notes so common in some other Bibles, such as the Geneva, had become quite controversial and so it was decided to largely avoid interpretive notes.
2. Communicate: to share with, especially the sharing of goods
3. meat: food or drink
4. Corn: grain, especially wheat or barley
5. rereward: archaic spelling of rearward, "to bring up the rear"
6. engines: clever inventions
7. Whales: aquatic reptiles, dinosaurs (Note the reference to feet in Ezekiel.)
8. Imagination: stubbornness
9. rooms: places, such as places at the table
10. patience: endurance
11. Thee, thou, thy, thine: pronouns of address used for the common people
12. Amazed: appalled, terrified
13. Anon: immediately
14. Leasing: lying
15. Carriage: things carried, baggage
16. Nephews: offspring, particularly grandchildren
17. Wounds: tasty morsels

~Joshua Porter