THE MAKING OF
THE KING JAMES VERSION OF THE BIBLE
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Submitted by Phillip A. Gray
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Dr. Rodney Cloud

Southern Christian University
(Now Amridge University)
Montgomery, Alabama
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Phillip A. Gray

The King James Version of the Bible is perhaps the most important and influential of all documents in English literature. It is widely recognized as a publishing phenomenon, having been printed more than any other book, and having been read by more than any other work in the English speaking world.\(^1\) Given its immense popularity and even the veneration in which it has been held to the present day, the King James Version (KJV) may be dubbed the “Vulgate of the Protestant Faith.”\(^2\) The mark that this book has left on English and American literature “might be traced in a thousand ways.”\(^3\)

This research paper will explore the origin, development and enduring value of the KJV under several rubrics. We will first look at the historic conditions that precipitated the birth of this English masterpiece. Next, we will investigate why it was believed at the time that a new English translation was needed. Third, the questions of who the translators were, and how they went about their work will be explored. Fourth, we will examine the relationship that the KJV bore to its predecessor, the Bishops’ Bible, (of which it was to be a revision). Fifth, the all-important issue of the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts underlying the translation will be tackled. Sixth, comments will be made about salient points found in the famous “Preface” to the King James Version. Seventh, we will review the form of the English language employed in the KJV. And, finally, we will evaluate the translation itself from the standpoint of its intrinsic strengths and weaknesses, and its subsequent impact on Church History.

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\(^3\) Ibid., 259.
The Historical Conditions That Begat the New Bible

The immediate historical circumstances leading up to the King James Version (or “Authorized Version,” abbreviated A.V.), began with the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603. Upon her passing, the Privy Council pronounced James VI of Scotland to be James I of Great Britain.¹ During what may be described as James’ “triumphal entry” into England, he was met at an estate near Huntingdon by a group of English Puritans who presented to him their Millenary Petition, “so called because it was subscribed by almost a thousand Puritan ministers (a tenth of the English clergy).”² The petition “enumerated a number of grievances against the Church of England they hoped he might address.”³ Specifically, the Puritans asked that the king “‘amend’ certain offensive human rites and ceremonies.”⁴

The petition was considered distasteful and even seditious by the traditional Anglican Church authorities and the universities.⁵ In response to the reformists’ requests, “James granted nothing. But he did promise and held his Hampton Court Conference with the Puritans in 1604.”⁶ Hampton Court would be the matrix in which the new version was conceived.

¹ Ibid., 203.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁵ Bobrick, 204.
⁶ Manschreck, 262. The political, social and religious reasons for which James may have agreed to hear the Puritans’ complaints are still a matter of speculation. However, Manschreck explains that, from the beginning, James was inclined to preserve the tenuous balance bequeathed him by the reign of Elizabeth, a balance of the Roman Catholic extreme to one side and the Puritan or reformist extreme on the other (her celebrated via media), Ibid., 259. Latourette adds that this delicate equilibrium is usually called “the Elizabethan settlement.” In Kenneth Scott Latourette, Christianity Through the Ages (New York. Harper & Row, 1965), 191. Bobrick reminds us that, under Elizabeth, the tensions had been kept in check relatively speaking, but near the end of her reign “there had been growing friction between the Puritan and Anglican wings of the Church.” In Bobrick, 203. Out of this milieu the KJV was born.
James had left Scotland on April 5, 1603.\textsuperscript{1} His coronation was on July 25, 1603, and after a delay of a few months (due to another outbreak of the plague), the conference finally convened on January 14, 1604.\textsuperscript{2} The Puritans were hoping to gain an advantage by the king’s accession, knowing that his formative years had been spent in Scotland under the powerful tutelage of Presbyterianism.\textsuperscript{3} However, they were soon to learn that James was not as sympathetic to their cause as they had wished.\textsuperscript{4}

Though ostensibly held “in the interest of religious toleration,”\textsuperscript{5} the Hampton Court deck was stacked heavily in favor of the Episcopal establishment. “Four Puritans were summoned before nine bishops, seven deans and archdeacons, five ecclesiastical lawyers, and the king himself.”\textsuperscript{6} The four Puritans had been hand picked by the ecclesiastical powers for their known moderation (though they were excluded from the initial session).\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{2} Bobrick, 208-209.
\textsuperscript{3} The Puritans were dissatisfied with the \textit{status quo}. They “had long been irritated by what they regarded as the compromises of the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559.” In Alister McGrath, \textit{In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture} (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 149.
\textsuperscript{4} Despite his upbringing, the king actually delighted in the splendors of regal power, and leaned more toward the concept of the divine right of kings as bolstered by a network of compliant monarchical bishops. In fact, James was “positively repelled by the newfangled Puritan ideas of self-government based on their congregational form of worship.” In Bobrick, 205. He had no desire to upset the delicate balance achieved in the reign of his predecessor.
\textsuperscript{5} In \textit{The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia}, 1929, 1939, 1956, ed., s.v. “English Versions,” by John Hutchison. However, Hutchinson makes the strange assertion that Hampton Court was held “before James was actually crowned.” The writer of this paper wonders about that remark in view of the chronology set forth above in Bobrick, n. 2. See also Bruce who states that the conference was held “the year after his accession to the English throne.” In F. F. Bruce, \textit{The Books and the Parchments: Some Chapters on the Transmission of the Bible} (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1950, 1963), 227. Perhaps Hutchinson simply meant that the events were set in motion for Hampton Court before the coronation, though he does not clearly state it that way.
\textsuperscript{7} Bobrick, 208. Those four Puritans were: John Reynolds, Laurence Chaderton, Thomas Sparke, and John Knewstubs. Ibid., 210.
Un fortunately, in making their case the Puritans were less than persuasive. Generally, the proceedings were going bad for them when, on the second day,\textsuperscript{1} Dr. John Reynolds (or Rainolds), the President of Corpus Christi College at Oxford, motioned that a new translation of the Bible be made into English.\textsuperscript{2} Bishop Bancroft protested the proposal. But the king dismissed the protest, instead finding the proposal of a new translation much to his liking.\textsuperscript{3} “Whereupon his Highness wished that some special pains should be taken in that behalf for one uniform translation…”\textsuperscript{4} Bobrick clarifies the king’s motives as perceiving the new Bible as “a national need,” and not just a concession to the Puritans.\textsuperscript{5}

*How the Fullness of Time Had Come for a New Translation*

There had been Elizabethan rumblings for a Bible revision. Near the end of her reign (1558-1603), a draft was made in Parliament for a new version, “an act for the reducing of diversities of bibles now extant in the English tongue to one settled vulgar translated from the original.”\textsuperscript{6} But, “nothing ever became of this draft during the reign of Elizabeth, who died in 1603…”\textsuperscript{7}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Bobrick, 214.
\item \textsuperscript{2} Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 308.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Bobrick, 214. Reynolds had complained specifically about the Prayer Book and certain intrusions from the Apocryphal books into the Anglican service via the Bishops’ Bible. Or, as Comfort says plainly, “Reynolds wanted to see one that was more accurate than previous translations.” In Comfort, *Essential Guide*, 145.
\item \textsuperscript{4} David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 433, citing the words of the nearly contemporaneous though perhaps propagandistic account of the conference by William Barlow, in his *Summe and Substance of the Conference*.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Bobrick, 214.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Laurence M. Vance, *A Brief History of English Bible Translations* (Pensacola, FL.: Vance Publications, 1993), 24. Bobrick adds that the act was “secretly drafted,” and that Elizabeth had discussed it in 1597 with Sir Francis Walsingham and Bishop John Aylmer. In Bobrick, 215.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Vance, *Brief History*, 24.
\end{itemize}
Even while in Scotland, James had been thinking about the need. For instance, “In the Kirk Assembly at Burntisland in May 1601, he had suggested that the Geneva Bible might be revised ‘both for the profit of it and the glory of it’….‘”\(^1\) James felt special antipathy for the Geneva Bible, the favorite of English Puritans but containing polemical comments made from a Calvinist perspective.\(^2\)

Moreover, it was an opportune time to translate anew, since for the past thirty or forty years before “substantial progress had been made in Greek and Hebrew studies.”\(^3\) The Bible officially appointed to be read in the churches, the Bishops’ Bible, was noticeably inferior to the Geneva Bible. Its English was deficient. Its translator’s knowledge of Hebrew and Greek had not been “good enough,” and in making changes “they were simply botching what already existed.”\(^4\)

Jack Lewis summarizes the intellectual climate in which the KJV came to light:

The King James Bible was born out of a need to still the voices of critics who had agitated against the Bishops’ Bible in the later years of Elizabeth’s reign and also out of a need to bring uniformity into a confused situation. Geneva Bibles were commonly used in homes, Bishops’ Bibles in churches.\(^5\)

The new Bible was intended to be a peacemaker for bringing all the parties together on one common ground. It was to be James’ “irenic” for the dawning era.\(^6\)

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1. Bobrick, 215. At this meeting, James had “specifically discussed metrical and other errors in the Psalms.” Ibid.
2. Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries*, 58-59. Bruce observes that, though James himself was not “deficient in scholarship,” he could not bring himself to recognize the superiority of the Geneva Bible over the Bishops’ Bible for his loathing of the annexed notes in the former, particularly those which inculcated the right to defy the edicts of a king when contrary to the will of God. In F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1961, 1979), 97.
6. Nicolson, 66. (The coinage is apparently a quaint but oxymoronic combination of “irenic” and “icon,” as in the derived sense of “iconoclastic,” PG.)
The Translators and Their Methods

Given its purpose to bring unification to the nation, the translators for the KJV were carefully selected from among both Puritans and Royalists, and represented the finest scholarship available in 17th Century England.\(^1\) Having given the official order for making the new translation on February 10, 1604, by July of that year the king had “appointed certain learned men to the number of four and fifty for the translating of the Bible” who were to be of the “best learned” from Westminster and the two Universities of Cambridge and Oxford.\(^2\) Due possibly to deaths and resignations, only forty seven names were actually listed as doing the work of translation.\(^3\)

There were to be six companies of translators altogether: two at Westminster, two at Oxford, and two at Cambridge.\(^4\) The First Westminster Company was assigned the books of Genesis through 2 Kings; the Second, the New Testament Epistles. The First Cambridge Company received 1 Chronicles through the Song of Songs; to the Second

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\(^1\) “Without exception, all were academically distinguished, belonged to the established Church—though quite a few (about a fourth) had Puritan leanings…” In Bobrick, 217-218. Wegner adds, “Most were the leading classical and Oriental scholars in England at the time, both traditional Anglican and Puritan, but some laymen were also included.” In Wegner, 309.

\(^2\) In *IDB*, s.v. “Versions, English,” by Branton.

\(^3\) Ibid. However, Metzger mentions that the number of those actually serving “was from forty eight to fifty.” In Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 72. Oddly, Wegner’s work, in a possible misprint, weighs in with the figure of “forty-four names.” In Wegner, *Journey From Texts*, 309. But, Bruce concurs with the number “forty seven.” In Bruce, *History of the Bible*, 97. On the other hand, the author of this paper counted fifty-one names listed in Bobrick’s Appendix giving the men and the division of labor by companies. In Bobrick, 313-316. To make matter’s more confusing, Nicolson in his Appendix says that fifty names were recorded, and then proceeds to list those fifty names by their companies. In Nicolson, 251-259. No wonder that Sir Frederick Kenyon had indicated decades earlier, “There is a slight uncertainty about some of the names, and some changes in the list may have been caused by death or retirement, but the total number of revisers was from forty-eight to fifty.” In Frederic G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1895. Reprinted by Lazarus Ministry Press (Columbus, OH: Vintage Archives, 1998), 230.

\(^4\) Metzger, *Bible in Translation*, 71.
was given the Apocrypha. The First Oxford Company was to complete Isaiah through
Malachi; the second group was to work on the Gospels, Acts and Revelation.¹

Kenyon comments on the final source of direction for this plan of revision:

It appears to have been James himself who suggested the leading features of the
scheme; namely, that the revision should be executed mainly by the Universities;
that it should be approved by the bishops and most learned of the Church, by the
Privy Council, and by the king himself, so that all the Church should be
concerned in it; and that it should have no marginal commentary, which might
render it the Bible of a party only.²

Explicit rules for the work of revising were handed down either from James
himself or by Bishop Richard Bancroft (in close collaboration with the king).³ Nicolson
classifies the “separate instructions” thus: Rules 1-5 as “concerned with continuity.” In
other words, the KJV was to be a revision of the Bishops’ Bible with modifications as
necessary in the interests of accuracy and excellence; Rules 6-7 as dealing with
“commentary and explanation.” Chiefly, the notes were to avoid sectarian controversy
and be used simply as technical clarifications of the text itself; Rules 8-15, touched on the
mechanics of translation and cooperation among the committees.⁴

At the end of the process, there was to be a general meeting of the chief persons
of each company (Rule 10). Nicolson notes, “By the time they emerged from the general
meeting, the words of the King James Bible would have gone through at least four
winnowing processes. Nothing was being left to chance.”⁵

¹ Nicolson, 251-259.
² Kenyon, Our Bible, 230.
³ Bruce, History, 98. Bancroft claimed that these instructions issued from the throne. In Nicolson,
⁴ Ibid., 72-83. For a succinct listing of the fifteen rules, see Bobrick, 316-317.
⁵ Nicolson, 81.
While some of the work began as early as 1604, it is usually thought that the pace did not pick up until 1607. Hutchison’s calculation is of two years in which “the revisers worked strenuously at it [their task].” Wegner says simply that it took “five years to complete.” Undeniably, for its time, the revision was a carefully worked out piece of literary craftsmanship whose superiority lay in its communal origins.

**Relationship to the Bishops’ Bible**

The King James Version was not really a new translation as such but was, as per the royal rules, a “moderate revision” of the Bishops’ Bible. Bruce avers that it was “formally a revision of the 1602 edition of the Bishops’ Bible.” Metzger reminds us that the KJV was “merely a revision of the Bishops’ Bible,” and that “this itself was a revision of the Great Bible, and the Great Bible a revision of Coverdale and Tyndale.”

Assessments vary as to what degree they actually accomplished this aim. Some say that about eight percent of the KJV is of the Bishops’ Bible. Others have estimated that only “about four percent of the form of the KJV came from it.”

Daniell attributes to Ward Allen the demonstration of how the syntax of the KJV was that peculiar to the Bishops’ Bible. He further tells us that, “The KJV’s reliance on

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1 Daniell, *Bible in English*, 438. Yet, Daniell takes issue with the usual thoughts on this, saying: “It has commonly been said that work did not begin until 1607. This follows Westcott’s 1868 calculation backwards from the ‘twice seven times seventy two [1,008] days and more’ the translators said that their work had taken: but Westcott’s arithmetic assumed that they did nothing else, even on Sundays.” Ibid.


3 Wegner, 311.


5 Bruce, *Books and Parchments*, 229.

6 Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 76. Metzger adds that the claim found on the title page, “newly translated,” was not accurate and contradicted the intended purpose as stated in the longer Preface. Ibid., n. 4.

7 Nicolson, 73.

Bishops’ for word order, for small unnatural inversions and even for syntax that might be thought strangled” explains to readers familiar with KJV its “more subtle sense of distance.”

Of course, the rules had allowed and encouraged other translations to be consulted in the process. “Internal evidence shows that the Tyndale-Coverdale versions are predominantly the source…” In fact, when one reads the KJV, by and large Tyndale himself is still being read! Jack Lewis supports this assertion by saying, “It has been estimated that 92 percent of the New Testament as left by Tyndale is carried over into the KJV.” Similarly, Daniell informs us that a computer study shows that Tyndale in the New Testament contributed about 83% of the text, and 76% of the Old Testament text.

Kenyon balances the above observations by recognizing that Tyndale indeed comes down to us through their revising of the Bishops’ Bible. But he adds that the Geneva Bible heavily influenced the KJV, and also that some readings were even taken from the Catholics’ Rheims New Testament. Lewis agrees, and cites studies proving that Rheims exerted an important influence on the KJV. Even though Rheims was not on their official list of works to compare, the KJV scholars still consulted it and incorporated certain elements of it into their own revision.

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1 Daniell, 447.
2 IDB, s.v., “Versions, English,” by Branton. He then enumerates other versions of which “great use was made,” as “Latin versions of Pagninus, Munster, Tremellius, Junius, and Beza, and of the Greek and Hebrew texts, which were available only in limited numbers and quality…The Rheims NT was certainly consulted on several occasions, and Luther’s German version exerted some influence.”
3 Lewis, 22.
4 Daniell, 448.
5 Kenyon, Our Bible, 223.
6 Lewis, 27.
As we shall see, the KJV translators were consciously indebted to their predecessors, as evidenced in the famous Preface. Hutchison also surveys the version’s link to the earlier Bibles: “It was the copestone of a work on which 90 years of solid labor had by different hands been expended, and it was done by half a hundred of the foremost scholars of the day who knew Heb and Gr, and who also knew English.”\(^1\)

*The Textual Basis Underlying the King James Version*

Bruce reminds us that this question is the most critical, since “the principal defect of the A.V. is…the text which they used was an inferior one.”\(^2\) Although there has been a trend in recent times to dispute this assertion, the preponderance of the evidence objectively evaluated buttresses a similar conclusion. It is simply a fact that the translators did not have before them the best textual materials when compared to more recent standards. This was acutely the case with the New Testament text.

For the Old Testament, the translators relied most upon two polyglots containing the Hebrew: the Complutensian Polyglot (1517) and the Antwerp Polyglot (1572). Where these two happened to diverge from each other, the translators fell back on either one or the other, except in about six places.\(^3\)

Beacham & Bauder imply that the Hebrew recension supporting the KJV was ultimately the Rabbinic Bible of Jacob Ben Chayyim (published by Daniel Bomberg in Venice in 1524-25).\(^4\) They contend that the Ben Chayyim printed edition was a recension based on late manuscripts (12\(^{th}\) Century or later).\(^5\) Bruce writes, “But Dr.

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2 Bruce, *History*, 127.
3 Lewis, 42.
5 Ibid., 66.
Kahle has pointed out that Ben Chayyim’s text depended on manuscripts not earlier than the fourteenth century.”¹ B. J. Roberts adds that Ben Chayyim himself recognized that his Second Edition was based on “late and unsatisfactory” manuscripts.²

In the Antwerp Polyglot (1569-72), another of their sources for the OT, the text of the Complutensian Polyglot was merged with the Ben Chayyim text.³ In fact, for centuries, most editions of the Hebrew Bible followed Ben Chayyim’s second edition.⁴

That Ben Chayyim’s was the basic text is not a major point of contention in the debate about the KJV, because, as Comforts assesses, “The Hebrew text they used (i.e., the Masoretic Text) was adequate.”⁵ (Comfort goes on to say, “but their understanding of the Hebrew vocabulary was insufficient.”⁶)

On the other hand, the translators did not use exclusively the Second Rabbinic Bible of Ben Chayyim nor did they consistently follow its readings.⁷ James Price adds that one can count at least 232 places where they drew from some other textual tradition, as the Septuagint (sometimes “against all other authorities”), the Vulgate, the Syriac, “or merely Rabbinic tradition.”⁸ But, in general, the KJV translators followed the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible.⁹

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¹ Bruce, Books and Parchments, 117-118. Wegner relates that the “first complete Hebrew Bible” was printed in 1488. In 1516-1517 the “first Rabbinic Bible appeared.” In 1524-1525 the second rabbinic edition was published; it was edited by a Hebrew Christian named Jacob ben Chayyim.” In Wegner, 175.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Bruce, Books and Parchments, 117. See also IDB, s.v. “Text, OT” by Roberts.
⁵ Comfort, 147.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Beacham & Bauder, 67.
⁸ Ibid., 73-74, n. 20. Beacham quotes from Price’s personal correspondence dated May 1, 1996.
⁹ Metzger informs us that in their time “there was no standard edition of the Hebrew Masoretic text of the Old Testament.” In Bible in Translation, 77. But, our research shows that it was still basically the MT in whatever editions they were consulting.
For the New Testament, the translators trusted a form of the Greek text that is loosely called the *Textus Receptus*.\(^1\) The implications of this simple fact are enormous for comparative evaluations of available English versions of the Bible. Current readers may have already noticed that “the New Testament of the King James Version has fifty more verses than do most modern versions.”\(^2\) Current readers will no doubt have also observed the absence of certain familiar passages from the KJV in the modern versions. How explain these differences?

A brief exploration of the history of the development of the *Textus Receptus* (TR) is highly enlightening for answering this question. The beginnings of this textual tradition go back to Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469-1536), the first to publish a printed edition of the Greek New Testament.\(^3\) Although the first Greek Testament to be printed was the Complutensian Polyglot (1514),\(^4\) Erasmus enjoys the prestige of the first whose work was published.\(^5\)

Erasmus’ first edition came out in 1516.\(^6\) While McGrath argues that “Erasmus traveled to various libraries to take notes on the best Greek manuscripts of the original text,”\(^7\) Metzger plainly says that his first edition was based on only a handful of rather

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1. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 106. Technically, the name *Textus Receptus* (“Received Text”) was not given to this form of the Greek New Testament until an advertiser boasted in 1633 that the edition being published was “the text which is now received by all.” Ibid., 106. The appellation is used particularly for Beza’s second edition, but is loosely applied to the similar editions which had preceded it from Erasmus through Stephanus (see Ibid., 104-105; also, Beegle says, “From a practical point of view, all the Greek texts from Erasmus through Elzevir can be classified together as the ‘Received Text.’” In Beegle, *God’s Word*, 31.).

2. Comfort, 151. Again, he adds that “the text of the TR has about one thousand more words than that of Westcott and Hort,” [i.e., the more up-to-date, critical texts commonly used today, PG]. Ibid., 152.


4. Ibid., 96.

5. Ibid., 99.

6. Ibid.

7. McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 56. It is true that Erasmus “had long been making collections for an edition of the Bible in Latin.” In Kenyon, 98. Perhaps McGrath was thinking of this prior library work.
late manuscripts found at Basle. “For most of the text he relied on two rather inferior manuscripts from a monastic library at Basle, one of the Gospels...and one of the Acts and Epistles, both dating from the about the twelfth century.”\(^1\) These he compared with only two or three other manuscripts.\(^2\) Kenyon writes that his first edition “was based on not more than six manuscripts at the most, and of these only one was either ancient or valuable, and none was complete....”\(^3\)

Compounding the problem is that “some of the words of this translation, which occur in no Greek manuscript whatever, still hold their place in our received Greek text.”\(^4\)

But even worse, there are emendations to the text lacking support from any of the reliable Greek manuscripts. Such additions sometimes come from later editions of the Vulgate.\(^5\)

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1 Metzger, Text, 99.
2 Ibid. Worse still, for Revelation Erasmus had but one 12th century copy that was missing the last leaf with its final six verses. So, he translated back into Greek from the Latin (as in the examples below in n. 4).

Jay P. Green, however, contends that Erasmus had access even to the contents of the Vaticanus Codex. As a defender of the TR, Green admits, “It is true that Erasmus chose only a handful of Greek texts to work from, and that there are a few places where he emended the text with poor evidence at hand, even translating from the Latin to the Greek in a place or two....” Green then adds (contrary to current scholarly consensus, PG), “The few manuscripts used by Erasmus were excellent exemplars of the extant text...Furthermore, Erasmus was in correspondence with others getting manuscripts from them. In fact, he had a correspondent at Rome who could give him readings from the now idolized Vaticanus Codex, but he counted it so unreliable that he would not use anything from it.” In Jay P. Green, Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, 4th ed. (Mac Dill AFB, FL.: MacDonald Publishing Company, 1972), Preface, xii.

Ironically, another defender of the superiority of the TR is Aldred Martin, who recognizes that the Vaticanus was not available to Erasmus and who thinks it good that it was not. In Alfred Martin, “A Critical Examination of the Westcott-Hort Textual Theory,” In Which Bible? ed. David Otis Fuller (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1970, 1975), 150. Bruce confirms that Erasmus indeed asked a friend at Rome to consult the Vaticanus, but it was only on one point, the passage about the three heavenly witnesses of 1 John 1:7. In Bruce, History, 127, n. 1.

3 Kenyon, 99. Of the TR, Metzger again reminds us that “its textual basis is essentially a handful of late and haphazardly collected minuscule manuscripts, and in a dozen passages its reading is supported by no known Greek witness.” In Metzger, Text, 106.

4 Kenyon, 99. By “translation” Kenyon means Erasmus’ re-translation of the Latin to Greek in some places. As in Revelation, for certain unclear or missing passages in his exemplar, Erasmus re-translated from the Latin Vulgate back into Greek. Examples of such words from “Erasmus’ self-made Greek text” are ακαθαρτητος for ακαθαρτης (“uncleanness,” Rev. 17:4), or ορθινος (22:16), etc. In Metzger, Text, 100. It has also been said that these verses contain twenty errors lacking any MS support. In Beacham & Bauder, 82.

5 Lewis, English Bible, 43. Lewis instances Acts 9:6 where to Erasmus’ 1516 edition were added the words from the Vulgate, “and he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do And the Lord said unto him....”
One notorious example of such emendations in subsequent editions of Erasmus is the Trinitarian formula found in 1 John 5:7b-8a (KJV), the so-called *Comma Johanneum*.\(^1\) In his first and second editions (1516, 1519), the words do not appear. After being challenged on that count by Edward Lee and others, Erasmus explained that the words did not appear in any of his Greek manuscripts.\(^2\) “Instead, the phrase was found only in the Latin Vulgate.”\(^3\) He rashly promised that if any such manuscript could be produced, he would include the words in a future edition. “At length such a copy was found—or was made to order!”\(^4\) It is highly suspected that this manuscript was “manufactured” for just the purpose of confuting Erasmus, being nothing more than a re-translation of the Vulgate back into Greek by Grey Friars in England.\(^5\)

Thus, the *Comma* was included in Erasmus’ third edition (1522), and in subsequent editions based on Erasmus’ text.\(^6\) The King James translators used such

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\(^1\) The familiar words, “…in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth…” (KJV).

\(^2\) James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 61. White has a very helpful summary of this issue, even supplying some information the author of this paper has not seen elsewhere (60-62).

\(^3\) Ibid., 60.


\(^5\) White, 61. White here adds that the Grey Friars provincial, Henry Standish, “was an old enemy of Erasmus.” Metzger says the manuscript had probably been written in Oxford about 1520 by a Franciscan friar named Froy (or Roy). In Metzger, *Text*, 101. Today, the codex is found at Trinity College, Dublin (Greg. 61). Ibid., n. 4. After centuries of more research, only three other manuscripts have since been found which contain these words, Greg. 88 (12\(^{\text{th}}\) cent, margin), Tisch.\(\omega\) 110 (16\(^{\text{th}}\) cent ms of Complutensian Polyglot), and Greg. 629 (14\(^{\text{th}}\) or 16\(^{\text{th}}\) cent). In Metzger, *Text*, 101-102. Likely, the *Comma* came about by a marginal gloss (a bit of allegorical interpretation) in an Old Latin MS of 1 John 5:7, from which it somehow came into the Old Latin Bible in the 5\(^{\text{th}}\) century. It “does not appear in manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate before about A.D. 800” (Ibid., 102).

\(^6\) Metzger, *Text*, 101. Such editions included: Erasmus’ fourth (1527) and fifth editions (1535), the four editions of Robert Estienne (or Stephanus, in 1546, 1549, 1550, and 1551), and the nine editions of Theodore Beza (1565 to 1604). Ibid., 103-104. Beza himself was responsible for a notorious conjectural emendation, lacking all textual support, which ended up in the KJV. In Rev. 16:5 he supplied the words “and shalt be” to the phrase, “who art and who wast, O Holy One.” In White, 63. White further adds that the mistakes made with the text of Revelation were not corrected by either Erasmus, Stephanus, or Beza (Ibid., 65). But, Metzger says that Erasmus, consulting the Complutensian Polyglot, had changed about ninety passages in Revelation in his fourth edition. In Metzger, *Text*, 102. White must be understood to mean, then, that all the mistakes made to the text of Revelation were not later corrected.
editions, as those by Theodore Beza (1588-1589 and 1598).\(^1\) Lewis says that at best the KJV translators could have used no more than twenty five late manuscripts.\(^2\)

Besides the problems with the editing of the TR itself, the wider textual family to which its underlying manuscripts belong is of less accuracy than other (more ancient) textual traditions, and certainly inferior to modern “eclectic editions” of the Greek New Testament. The type of text used for the TR is often called the Byzantine text, “because it is substantially the same as the standard Greek text which came into being during the fifth century A.D. at Byzantium (Constantinople, modern Istanbul)....”\(^3\) It is sometimes dubbed the Majority Text, because the majority of extant Greek manuscripts are of this type.\(^4\)

However, while the “dominant manuscripts” of the TR were of the Byzantine tradition, there is an important distinction between the two. “The Byzantine text-type is found in several thousand witnesses, while the TR did not refer to one hundredth of that evidence.”\(^5\) In an excellent and fair-minded critique of the Majority Text, Daniel Wallace points out that the Majority Text differs from the TR in about 1,838 places.\(^6\) The truth is, the TR follows only one stream within the larger Byzantine family.\(^7\)

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\(^1\) Metzger, *Text*, 105. Beegle says that the KJV used Beza’s 1604 edition. In Beegle, 21. It is interesting to note: “The TR is the text on which the KJV was based: there are over 30 editions, none 100 percent identical.” In John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *The Facts On the King James Only Debate* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 10.

\(^2\) Lewis, 42.

\(^3\) Beegle, 31.

\(^4\) Ibid. Stephen Neil observed that the Byzantine (or Constantinopolitan) text type “goes back to a carefully prepared edition of the text, which by the eighth century had acquired almost official status in the Greek-speaking churches, which because of this official status came to be far more often copied than any other, and which gradually came to reign almost alone.” In Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 68.


\(^7\) White, 64.
The overall problem is that the Byzantine (Majority Text) tradition is not the most accurate. It appears to be a conflated text, the result of a fourth century reviser, or revisers, “who wished to produce a smooth, easy, and complete text.”¹ There is no conclusive evidence that this text type as such existed before the middle of the fourth century.²

The current scholarly consensus is that the Majority Text tradition shows much evidence of the scribal tendency to harmonize texts.³ Such harmonization (conflation) would explain why the KJV, based on this tradition, is about fifty verses longer than modern translations taken from today’s critical editions.⁴ A better if shorter textual tradition, and one more closely aligned with the original text, is found in the Alexandrian family.⁵

With Nicolson, we are simply forced to face the fact that “the Hebrew and particularly the Greek texts they were working from were not the most accurate, even by

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¹ Metzger, Text, 131.
² Carson, King James Version Debate, 44. Carson has an excellent and balanced discussion of the text critical issues impinging on the KJV as outlined through his fourteen theses designed to answer the defenders of the superiority of the Majority Text and/or the Textus Receptus (43-78).
³ Wegner, Journey from Texts, 339.
⁵ There are dissenting voices, however. Zane C. Hodges sets forth a defense of the Majority Text and a challenge for the reigning tendency to set it aside in current studies. In Zane C. Hodges, “The Greek Text of the King James Version,” in Bibliotheca Sacra (Oct/Dec 1968): 334-345. David Otis Fuller has edited a well-known volume representative of this school. In Fuller, Which Bible? Carson evaluates arguments by Wilbur N. Pickering on this behalf with due deference to Pickering’s scholarship, though he takes issue with his conclusions. In Carson, 48-49. Daniel Wallace tells us that this line of thought is often associated with some who have been on the staff at Dallas Theological Seminary. In Wallace, “Some Second Thoughts,” Bibliotheca Sacra: 271.

In answering Zane C. Hodges’ defense of the Majority Text, Gordon D. Fee provides excellent evidence for the superiority of the Egyptian or Alexandrian text type (of which the fourth-century codices B and R are representatives). In Gordon D. Fee, “Modern Textual Criticism and the Revival of the Textus Receptus,” in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (Mar 1978): 19-33. See also Fee’s essay which counters the claim (by some TR/MT advocates) that the Alexandrian text type was a later recension, and therefore not reliable in determining the more primitive readings from its time period. In Gordon D. Fee, “P⁶⁶, P⁵² and Origen: The Myth of Early Textual Recension,” in New Dimensions in New Testament Study, eds. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 19-45.
the standards of their own time.’”¹ This is not to say that the textual basis of the KJV is dangerous or misleading in areas of doctrine affecting our duties to God. Because, as Kenyon concurs, “their texts were substantially true, though not in detail.”² Most of the discrepancies between the KJV text and modern critical texts “are inconsequential from the standpoint of theological meaning.”³ Beegle is quick to remind us, “On the other hand, we must bear in mind that the ‘Received Text’ is not a bad or heretical text. It is a substantially correct text.”⁴ We close this section with an apt quote from McGrath:

> It must be made clear immediately that this does not call into question the general reliability of the King James Bible. The issue concerns minor textual variations. Not a single teaching of the Christian faith is affected by these variations, nor is any major historical aspect of the gospel narratives or early Christianity affected.⁵

*The Preface to the King James Version*

Miles Smith, one of the translators, is credited with writing the famous Preface.⁶ Though it rarely appears in modern editions, the Preface is a fascinating account of the basic principles that guided the translators in their labors. We can do no more here than briefly summarize its salient features.⁷

The translators remind us that for a good work, one will be criticized, since a new work is “welcomed with suspicion instead of love…so, a hard thing it is to please all….”⁸ Moreover, they admit that to do a good work for the public, as in clarifying the Word of

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¹ Nicolson, 224.
² Kenyon, 235.
³ Beegle, 32. Beegle says that the committee for the English Revised Version had found the TR used by the KJV to be “mistaken in more than 5000 readings, counting each rejected reading as one…” (Ibid.).
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ McGrath, 242.
⁶ Daniell, *Bible in English*, 446.
⁷ The Preface may be found in its entirety, with modernized spelling, in Appendix C in Beegle, 128-151. For the entire Preface in its original spelling, see an appendix in Daniell, 775-793.
⁸ Preface, in Beegle, 128, 130.
God, is “to be gored by every sharp tongue. For he that meddleth with men’s religion in any part meddleth with their custom…they cannot abide to hear of altering.”

Next, they reveal something about their high view of Scripture in, “The original thereof being from heaven, not from earth; the author being God, not man; the inditer [one who prompts or dictates or composes], the Holy Spirit….” This high view of Scripture may be important for understanding their motives and methods.

They point out that translating the Bible is necessary. They mention the examples of Jesus and the apostles in their use of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the LXX. Though “it needed in many places correction,” still “it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to them to take that which they found, (the same being for the greatest part true and sufficient) rather than by making a new…."

Then they elaborate on how the idea of translating the Scripture into the common tongue is not a new one, but was conceived in the earliest era of the church. Further, they envisioned their work as building upon the foundation of earlier translators.

In a memorable phrase they “affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English set forth by men of our profession…containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God,” just as a royal discourse translated into another tongue is still “the King’s speech.”

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1 Ibid., 131.  
2 Ibid., 133.  
3 Ibid., 135.  
4 Ibid., 136. The implication is that a translation does not have to be perfect to be useful as a conduit of the knowledge of the Word of God, as though the translators realize that their own work was neither inspired nor perfect.  
5 Ibid., 137-139.  
6 Ibid., 140-141.  
7 Ibid., 142.
Their intent: “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.”¹

Then comes an explanation of their methods and defense of the marginal notes with alternate readings.² And finally, they clarify their reasons for not being too concerned with uniformity of phrasing (in each case using the same English word for the same original).³

*The English of the King James Version*

The version is still celebrated for its excellent English literary style. We recognize it as reflective of an earlier era. But, its language was actually antiquarian from the outset.⁴ It “was born archaic.”⁵ C. Clifton Black summarizes Nicolson’s work as saying that the KJV’s expression was “something two registers above seventeenth century idiom—‘a form no one had ever spoken.’”⁶

For example, the KJV’s conspicuous older pronouns, as “thou,” “thee,” “thine,” etc., were already a little archaic even in 1611.⁷ The ironic truth about this usage is that, in the era in which they were commonly used, these forms were considered informal, while “ye” and “you” were reserved for formal address (of a superior, for example).⁸

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¹ Ibid., 146.
² Ibid., 148-149.
³ Ibid., 149-150. This decision on their part has been the source of some legitimate criticism in that, at times, it unnecessarily obscures the finer nuances of meaning from the original languages.
⁴ Nicolson, 255.
⁵ Daniell, 441.
⁷ Beegle, 63, 69.
⁸ J. N. Hook, *History of the English Language* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1975), 162. The author of this research recognizes, however, that usage evolves—even “flip flops”—over time, and that due to their hallowed associations with the A.V. itself in the minds of many, these forms are now usually used with the opposite intent.
It is interesting to note that despite its few Latinisms, the KJV epitomizes good “English” as such. Its base is Anglo-Saxon. In fact, 94% of its terms are of Anglo-Saxon origin and only 6% are borrowed from other languages.¹

Its language is high flown in places. Yet, it has been observed that its’ “much vaunted style” is attributable “to its theological imperatives, not to a stylistic goal.”² For instance, their commitment to accuracy in the OT led to a unique tone. Keeping the Hebraisms “is precisely what gave it special dignity and strength.”³ As McGrath states, they achieved a special “eloquence by accident.”⁴

*The Translation Itself*

While the KJV was an imperfect product from the perspective of its human translators,⁵ it nevertheless has found a place unparalleled in the annals of English literature. Though sharply criticized when first issued, and though it had to “fight for its position for forty years,” the KJV finally gained a “victory which was to make this version the Bible of the English-speaking world for more than 250 years and makes it still perhaps the best loved and the most widely used.”⁶ As F. F. Bruce concludes:

> It is not the Bible of high church or low church, state church or free church, Episcopalian, Presbyterian or Independent, Baptist or Paedobaptist, Briton or American; it has remained The Bible *par excellence* wherever the English tongue is spoken for over three hundred years.⁷

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¹ Hook, *History of the English Language*, 68. Bobrick confirms this, saying that 9/10th are of Saxon derivation. In Bobrick, 254.


³ Bobrick, 255.

⁴ McGrath, 254.

⁵ For a fair critique of the KJV from the standpoint of translation theory, etc., see White, 223-241. Also, for “doctrinal problems” see Lewis, 35-68. (Though, frankly, I would not call all his examples “doctrinal” as we commonly think of that term.) For probable Calvinistic leanings in the KJV, see Dan Corner, *A Critique of Gail Riplinger’s Scholarship and KJV Onlyism* (Washington, PA: Evangelical Outreach, 1999), 36-40.

⁶ *IDB*, s.v., “Versions, English,” by Branton. Though the KJV which is in circulation today is not the same as the original 1611 edition. Ours is basically Dr. Blayney’s 1769 Oxford Bible (Ibid.).

⁷ Bruce, *Books and Parchments*, 228.
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