



The 400th Anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible:

The History, Values, and Limitations of the KJV Translation

by J. Greg Sheryl

This year marks the 400th Anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible, also known as the Authorized Version. Celebrations of this quatercentenary have been occurring and are scheduled to occur this year in such places as Ashland Theological Seminary, Baylor University, Houston Baptist University, and Washington, D.C.¹

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE KJV

In 1603, James VI, king of Scotland (1566-1625) became king of England following the death of Elizabeth I of England. Thus, James VI of Scotland was now also James I of England, becoming the first Stuart king in England. In April 1603, as James was en route to London, he was presented with what was called the Millenary Petition,² so called because it supposedly contained the signatures of a thousand Puritans. They were concerned about practices in the Church of England to which they objected.

The Church of England was a divided church, with the conservatives who liked the ecclesiastical system the way it was, and the Puritans who thought that the Reformation had not had its full intended effect in the Church of England. Some, though not all, of the Puritans' objections

addressed Roman Catholic practices that the Church of England had retained, such as bowing to the name of Jesus,³ the rite of confirmation, "the use of the cross as a kind of magic symbol," "kneeling at communion," and so forth.⁴

After receiving the Millenary Petition, King James decided to convene a conference. Originally it was scheduled for Nov. 1, 1603, but was moved to January 1604.⁵ The three-day Hampton Court Conference began Jan. 12, 1604.⁶

The conservatives (bishops and deans) of the Church of England were present, as were the four Puritan representatives. Adam Nicholson says that representatives from both sides knew one another. "The four representatives of the Puritan party were in fact old friends of many of the [Anglican] bishops and deans,"⁷ Nicholson wrote. "This was not an encounter of parties at each other's throats."⁸ He wrote that the more radical Puritans had been excluded from the Conference.⁹ "The only outsider, ironically enough, was the king."¹⁰

King James first met with the representatives of the conservatives in the Church of England. He soon tore into them, although he ended the hours-

long meeting with them more gently.¹¹

Then King James met with the Puritans. "James may have been rude, challenging and clever with the bishops," Nicholson wrote, "Now, he was even worse with the Puritans."¹²

Nicholson added:

"James dismissed all the Puritan objections. He was familiar with them all. They were the points which any Scots Presbyterian would have made and which strict English Protestants, dissatisfied with the compromise of the English Church, had been making since the 1550s. Everyone knew the territory; there were no surprises, but the atmosphere was nasty. These were moderate and distinguished men, suggesting moderate changes. But James ... was treating them like extreme schismatics from the outer reaches of Anabaptist lunacy."¹³

In his biography of King James, David Teems wrote:

"In the end, other than the small concession to the Book of Common Prayer, which James intended to revise anyway, he dismissed *all* of the Puritan objections."¹⁴

However, in his meeting on Monday with the Puritans, one of their representatives, John Reynolds (or Rainolds) said:

“The petitioning ministers he represented would like ‘one only translation of ye byble to be authentical and read in ye church’. In another jotted-down account of the scene, Reynolds is more courteous: ‘May your Majesty be pleased that the Bible be new translated?’”¹⁵

This item “was not even listed on the Puritan’s original list of grievances.”¹⁶ But the request found favor with the king.

About 50 translators¹⁷ (some say it was 47; others say it was 54) worked on this translation. They were divided into six companies, with each working on a portion of the Bible. The Apocrypha¹⁸ was included. The translators were given rules to govern the process. Seven years later, in 1611, their work was printed.

NOT WELL-RECEIVED AT FIRST

It took many years for the King James Bible to gain wide acceptance. The favorite Bible of Protestants was the Geneva Bible of 1560 — the Bible that the Pilgrims brought with them on the Mayflower to America in 1620.

Nicholson wrote:

“Lancelot Andrewes [one of the KJV translators] nearly always took his sermon texts from the Geneva [Bible]. ... Most extraordinarily of all, Miles Smith, in the Preface to the new translation [the KJV], quotes from the very Geneva Bible which it was, in part, intended to replace.”¹⁹

Nicholson also tells of a Puritan Hebrew scholar named Hugh Broughton, who had wanted to be part of the KJV translation committee, but who was rejected because of his rudeness:

“Broughton castigated the Translators. Their understanding of Hebrew was inadequate; where they had stumbled on something worthwhile, they had usually relegated it to the margins. ... Blas-

phemy, most damnable corruptions, intolerable deceit and vile imposture were terms scarcely bad enough to describe the depths of their degeneracy. ‘The late Bible’, he wrote, ‘was sent to me to censure: which bred in me a sadness that will grieve me while I breathe, it is ill done. Tell His Majesty that I had rather be rent in pieces with wild horses, than any such translation by my consent should be urged upon poor churches ... The new edition crosseth me. I require it to be burnt.’”²⁰

Then there were the printing errors. Nicholson recounted:

“[The 1611 KJV] was littered with misprints, ‘hoopes’ for ‘hookes,’ ‘she’ for ‘he’, three whole lines simply repeated in Exodus, and alarmingly ‘Judas’ for ‘Jesus’ in one of the Gospels.²¹ ... When, finally, in the nineteenth century, Dr. F. Scrivener, a scholar working to modern standards, attempted to collate all the editions of the King James Bible then in circulation, he found more than 24,000 variations between them. The curious fact is that no one such thing as ‘The King James Bible’ — agreed, consistent and whole — has ever existed. ... Being only a revision of earlier translations, and not a new work, there was no need for it to be entered in the Stationers’ Register, which recorded only new publications and so, in addition to this most famous book having no agreed text, it also has no publication date.”²²

Nicholson noted that it was 1660 before the King James Bible began to come into its own as “the Bible,” finally replacing the Geneva Bible in popularity.²³

The King James Version has been revised throughout its history. According to one source, “Previous major revisions of this translation were issued in 1629, 1638, 1762, and 1769,”²⁴ with the 1769 revision being the work of Benjamin Blayney. According to King James Version researcher Rick Norris:

“Most editions of the King James Version that we use today are **substantially** the same as the 1769 version of the KJV, but some ‘spelling updates and the making of other changes [actually] continued in KJV editions until after 1885.’”²⁵

Christian researcher Ron Rhodes wrote:

“It is also noteworthy that some translational errors in the KJV have never been corrected. For example, the name ‘Jesus’ appears in both Acts 7:45 and Hebrews 4:8 when ‘Joshua’ is actually the correct rendering. Moreover, Matthew 23:24 is rendered ‘Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.’ The Greek text actually means ‘strain out a gnat,’ not ‘at a gnat.’ The average reader, of course, is completely unaware of mistranslations such as these.”²⁶

King James was not one of the translators and was a contradictory figure. While he had a wife and fathered children, he is widely believed to have been a homosexual. Christian evangelist Ralph Woodrow wrote:

“His reign was not without scandals, and historians are still divided as to whether he was homosexual or bisexual. That he was unfaithful to his marriage appears to be well-documented in encyclopedias.”²⁷

He was very intelligent and enjoyed theological disputes, yet he also had a foul mouth. He may have been a better ruler of Scotland, where he began his reign, than in England, where he ruled in the latter part of his life.

KJV NOT THE FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

Not only was the King James Version of the Bible not the first English translation of the Bible, it was not even the first *authorized* translation of the Bible. There were a number of English Bibles that preceded the King James Version, including the 14th-century Wycliffe Bible,²⁸ William Tyn-

dale's New Testament (1526), the Coverdale Bible (1535), Matthew's Bible (1537), the Great Bible (1539),²⁹ the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishops' Bible (1568),³⁰ and the Rheims-Douay Bible (1582-1610). The Rheims-Douay was an English Roman Catholic translation.

Although King James commissioned the version that bears his name, the late textual critic and scholar Bruce Metzger wrote:

"Beyond the royal authority under which it was made and the statement on the title page 'Appointed to be read in churches,' it had never been officially authorized by ecclesiastical or legislative sanction. In the long run, however, the popularity attained eventually by the version 'authorized' it in the national mind — but in a sense different from the authorization of the Great Bible of 1539 and the Bishops' Bible of 1568."³¹

So, calling the King James Version the Authorized Version may be a misnomer. However, its popularity ended up authorizing it in the minds of the public.

PRAISE FOR THE KJV

The King James Version has been very popular since the late 1600s. No other English Bible translation seriously challenged it from then until the 1880s, when the English Revised Version (abbreviated "RV") was published. A KJV commemorative booklet notes that:

"In 1881, the scholars who developed the Revised Version had this to say about the King James Version: *We have had to study this great Version carefully and minutely, line by line; and the longer we have been engaged upon it the more we have learned to admire its simplicity, its dignity, its power, its happy turns of expression, its general accuracy, and, we must not fail to add, the music of its cadences and the felicities of its rhythm.*"³²

The Preface to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (which was, indirectly, a revision of the King

James Bible)³³ praised the KJV in these words:

"The King James Version has with good reason been termed 'the noblest monument of English prose.' ... It entered, as no other book has, into the making of the personal character and the public institutions of the English-speaking peoples. We owe to it an incalculable debt."³⁴

The Preface to the New King James Version of the Bible quotes these words of the 19th-20th century British playwright George Bernard Shaw in praise of the KJV:

"The translation was extraordinarily well done because to the translators what they were translating was not merely a curious collection of ancient books written by different authors in different stages of culture, but the Word of God divinely revealed through His chosen and expressly inspired scribes. In this conviction they carried out their work with boundless reverence and care and achieved a beautiful artistic result."³⁵

One pamphlet commemorating the 400th anniversary of the KJV notes that in his famous 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*, the American Revolutionary figure Thomas Paine "used the rhetorical tone of the King James Version to frame his own words."³⁶

Professor and author Gordon Campbell points out that Abraham Lincoln used language apparently based on the KJV in his Gettysburg Address and he explicitly quoted Matthew 18:7 from the KJV in his second inaugural address.³⁷ (Lincoln also quoted from Psalm 19:9 and references Matthew 7:1 in the KJV in this latter speech.) Campbell also notes that in his famous 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, the late Martin Luther King, Jr. obviously referenced Isaiah 40:4-5 from the King James Version.³⁸

Both the first U.S. President, George Washington, and the most recent, Barack Obama, used a King James Bible when taking the presidential

oath of office.³⁹ Other U.S. Presidents who used a King James Bible at their inaugurations include Abraham Lincoln, Jimmy Carter, and both George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush.⁴⁰

Additionally, one source notes:

"Hundreds of idioms or figures of speech — semiproverbial or proverbial expressions that might have come from everyday usage but had never been made prominent in literature — became prominent through this Bible."⁴¹

This same source lists in a sidebar some examples of KJV phrases (whether it was original with the KJV or not) that have made their way into our English language, phrases such as: "the salt of the earth," "the apple of his eye," "a lamb to the slaughter," "seek and ye shall find," "fight the good fight," "no rest for the wicked," "fall from grace," and "by the skin of your teeth."⁴²

This all-too-brief survey shows us just some of the influence of the King James Version of the Bible in its 400-year history.

THE KING JAMES-ONLY CONTROVERSY

While there is much to admire about the King James Version of the Bible, some Christians have developed an unnatural attachment to it. They believe that this English version of the Bible is the only valid one, at least in the English language. Indeed, at least one contemporary KJV-only advocate has indicated that those who cannot read English would have to learn English in order to be able to have God's Word.⁴³

Some KJV-only proponents have gone so far as to label other modern-day English Bible translations as "perversions," "New Age Bible versions," or even "Satanic."

The Quarterly Journal has addressed the King James-only controversy in the past.⁴⁴

There are some perverse English Bible translations, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses' *New World Translation* or the Mormons' *Inspired Version*

of the Bible.⁴⁵ However, many of the major, widely published Bibles that we have today are faithful attempts at rendering God's Word into contemporary language. Some of these Bibles (such as the New King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, and the English Standard Version) are revisions of earlier Bibles, such as the 1901 American Standard Version, which was itself a revision of the 1881-1885 English Revised Version.

Even the King James Version was actually a revision of earlier Bibles. Initially the King James Version was to be a revision of the Bishops' Bible, published in 1568:

"The King had forty unbound folio copies of the Bishops' Bible, 1602 edition, sent to the translators, a strong message that they were to stick closely to that text. But the translators did not allow themselves to be strapped to the Bishops' Bible. Earlier translations were to be used if it was deemed that they agreed better with the original text."⁴⁶

Those "earlier translations" included The Geneva Bible and The Great Bible along with translations by William Tyndale, John Rogers (The Matthew's Bible), and Miles Coverdale. The Rev. Steven Houck provides additional specifics:

"...the King James Version is not a totally new work. In terms of literary units — phrases and clauses — the King James Version is about thirty nine percent new translation. Sixty one percent of the phrases are taken over from older English versions. In fact, the King James Version can be considered the fifth revision of the work of William Tyndale who first translated the New Testament into English from the Greek. Before Tyndale there was the translation (1380) of John Wycliffe (An English Reformer often called *the Morning Star of the Reformation*) and the translation of John Purvey (A Colleague of Wycliffe), but they were trans-

lated from the Latin Bible. Tyndale was the first to go back to the original languages."⁴⁷

Thus, the King James Version was not actually a fresh translation of the Bible from the original languages that the Bible was written in: Hebrew and Aramaic (for the Old Testament) and Greek (for the New Testament).⁴⁸ Additionally, the Bishops' Bible itself was a revision of the Bible translation works of Tyndale and also of Coverdale earlier in that century.⁴⁹

While some current English Bibles are, therefore, revisions of an earlier version rather than a translation from the original biblical languages, other contemporary English Bibles actually are translations from the original languages (such as the New International Version, the New Living Translation, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, the NET Bible, the New English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, and the Good News Translation).

Among those who have pledged exclusive allegiance to the King James Version, we would not include those who merely adhere to the King James Version due to a personal preference. Perhaps they enjoy the majestic language of the KJV or they and/or their family grew up using it. Perhaps they prefer it for other reasons.

Some KJV-only advocates, by contrast, have elevated the use of the King James Version to a religious dogma. They truly believe that this version of the Bible, good though it is, is the one true Bible that God Himself has ordained.

In an article titled "King James Only?" Christian evangelist and author Ralph Woodrow wrote:

"A young man we know visited a small church here in southern California. The Bible he carried on that occasion happened to be the *New International Version* (NIV). Being unaware of the 'King James Only' controversy, he was puzzled when someone told him the church was planning a 'Bible Burning Service.' The purpose would be to burn Bibles (like his NIV) and every other version — *except* the KING

JAMES VERSION (KJV)! ... Admittedly this is an extreme example; not everyone who is 'King James Only' would carry it this far. But this teaching does breed radical and misleading claims: that every version except the King James Version is a *perversion*; that newer translations are inspired by Satan; that they are part of a gigantic conspiracy, promoted by the New Age Movement! I received a letter some years ago expressing the view that those who use versions other than the KJV are in danger of having their names taken out of the Book of Life! Please be assured that my use of the term 'King James Only' is simply for clarification. I am not putting anyone down for using the KJV. I use it myself and have for years. But needless and harmful divisions occur when people insist that ONLY the KJV should be used."⁵⁰

Before discussing the King James-only position further, we should point out several things: First, while we believe in the Bible as being the inspired, inerrant Word of God, this only applies to what are called the original autographs of the Bible. (The original autographs of the Bible are those first copies of the books in the Bible as they were written by the authors of the Scripture in the original biblical languages: Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament.) So, the original documents of the Bible are inerrant. The Bible itself bears testimony to its being God's Word (e.g., 2 Timothy 3:16-17; John 10:35). In His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus continually cited Scripture as being authoritative and authored by God (e.g., Matthew 4:4) and the apostles did the same (e.g., 2 Peter 1:21).

Secondly, however, none of the original autographs has survived. Many have pointed out that perhaps the reason that God didn't permit the original autographs to survive was that people might have worshipped them if they had survived. Thus, what we have today are *copies* of the original autographs. Over the centuries,

some transcription errors crept into those copies since, until the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, these copies were all handwritten by various individuals with varying degrees of care and precision.

Thirdly, even if we had the error-free autographs there is no such thing as a perfect translation of the Word of God from the biblical languages into other languages. In order to achieve a perfect understanding of the original autographs, we would actually have to be able to read and understand the Bible in its original languages, and also have a knowledge of the customs and way of life of biblical times. Additionally, biblical translators, as careful as they are, sometimes have to make interpretations as to how to understand and translate Bible passages. No individual or group is able to do this perfectly.

Things are not as hopeless as they seem, however, for the God Who inspired His Word, the Bible, is aware of all this. Although the Bible, as it has come down to us, contains some copyists' errors, for the most part we can be confident that the English Bible translations that we use today — whether the King James Version or the majority of modern translations — are the Word of God. Renowned New Testament textual critic⁵¹ Dr. Daniel B. Wallace told Christian apologist Lee Strobel:

“The fact is that scholars across the theological spectrum say that in all essentials — not in every particular, but in *all* essentials — our New Testament manuscripts go back to the originals.”⁵²

Wallace also declared:

“Only about one percent of [NT textual] variants are both meaningful, which means they affect the meaning of the text to some degree, and viable, which means they have a decent chance of going back to the original [NT] text. ... But most of these are not very significant at all.”⁵³

Later, in the same interview, Wallace stated:

“Let me repeat the basic thesis that has been argued since [the mid-1700s⁵⁴]: *No cardinal or essential doctrine is altered by any textual variant that has plausibility of going back to the original.* The evidence for that has not changed to this day.”⁵⁵

The KJV-only advocates are not monolithic, however. There are shades of difference among their views. Additionally, some KJV-only advocates are more extreme than others. It is also important to keep in mind that the KJV-only position is mostly concerned with the New Testament, because both the King James Version and modern English Bible translations use the same basic Hebrew text in translating the Old Testament.⁵⁶

In his book refuting the KJV-only position, titled, *The King James Only Controversy*,⁵⁷ Christian apologist and author James White divides KJV-only advocates into several groups:

1. Those who believe that the Greek text underlying the KJV New Testament is a superior Greek text to the Greek text underlying most of the modern translations. The New Testament Greek text that the King James translators used was a somewhat worked-over version of the Greek New Testament text produced by the 16th-century Dutch Catholic priest and humanist Erasmus. This version of Erasmus' Greek New Testament later became known as the Textus Receptus. A 20th-century KJV-only view based on the superiority of the Textus Receptus was taught by the late Bible teacher Jasper James Ray, author of the book *God Wrote Only One Bible*.⁵⁸

A variation of the Textus Receptus text view is the Majority [Greek] Text view. This view proposes that the New Testament Greek text that accords with the majority of Greek manuscripts is the best New Testament text. However, according to Wallace there are 1,838 differences between the Textus Receptus and the Majority Text.⁵⁹ Thus, they are not identical Greek texts. However, there are defenders of both the Majority Text as well as those who defend the

Textus Receptus. Furthermore, as White points out, KJV-only advocates sometimes cite Majority Text advocates to buttress their views.⁶⁰ An example of this is the use by KJV-only advocates of the 19th-century textual critic Dean John William Burgon⁶¹ in support of the King James-only position. Burgon is often cited by KJV-only advocates, as if he were one of their own, although Burgon was actually similar in respects to the Majority Text advocates, rather than being a KJV-only proponent.⁶²

2. There are those who would go even further in their view of the Textus Receptus than those mentioned above. They would claim that the Textus Receptus “either has been supernaturally preserved over time or even inspired, and hence maintained in an inerrant condition. They would believe the same concerning the Hebrew text utilized by the KJV translators.”⁶³

3. Whereas the second group above would maintain that the Greek and Hebrew texts underlying the KJV are inspired, there is a more radical KJV-only view that believes that God inspired the actual KJV translation itself. White notes:

“Most King James Only advocates would fall into this group. They believe that the KJV itself, as an English language translation, is inspired and therefore inerrant. ... This group's key affirmation, which gives form and substance to the entire KJV Only controversy, is found in the following equation: **The King James Bible Alone = The Word of God Alone.** We *must* understand that this is the starting point in the thinking of most KJV Only believers. This belief gives rise to so much of the heat that marks this debate, for in the mind of a convinced KJV Only believer, any attack upon the KJV is an attack upon God's Word.”⁶⁴

In an important footnote to the above citation, White states:

“Some [of these] advocates try to avoid using the words *inspired* and *inerrant*, but when you ask

them if there are any errors in the KJV, they will say there are not. If you ask whether a better translation could be made, they will deny the possibility. Hence, whether or not they use the exact terms, the functional position they take is that the KJV is inspired and inerrant.”⁶⁵

4. Among those at the most radical end of the KJV-only spectrum are such authors as Peter Ruckman, Gail Riplinger (author of the book *New Age Bible Versions*⁶⁶ and other KJV-only books), and Dr. Samuel Gipp. The views of these advocates are irrational and bizarre. Gipp, for instance, believes that those who do not know English need to learn English to be able to obtain the truth of God as it is revealed in the King James Version.⁶⁷

Although we have noted above *distinctions* among the spectrum of KJV-only advocates, in what follows, it will not be possible to deal individually with these various shades of KJV-only believers, other than having distinguished between them above. Thus, the reader should know that in the discussion that follows, we must of necessity, perhaps unfairly, lump all KJV-only advocates together, based on their common adherence to the King James Version as being the best (or only) English version of God’s Word today. The reader should therefore be very aware that not everything that is said below will apply to all four groups of KJV-only advocates distinguished above.

THE FOUR “RAILS” OF THE KJV-ONLY POSITION⁶⁸

The KJV-only position seems to run along four rails: One rail is that of the Greek text that underlies the New Testament of the King James Bible. This text has some differences between it and the Greek text that is the basis for *most* modern translations of the Bible (excluding, for example, the New King James Version, which uses the same Greek text used by the King James Version).

A second rail of the KJV-only position is that of translation philosophy. Bible translations that truly *are* trans-

lations — as opposed to paraphrases, for instance — tend to use greater or lesser degrees of freedom in how they translate the language of the biblical texts. Those who tend to lean more toward a literal, word-for-word translation of the biblical text are called “formal equivalence” translations. These translations strive, as much as is feasible, to reproduce the exact wording and syntax of the biblical text, while still producing readable English (or whatever language the Bible is being translated into). Some English formal equivalence translations are the King James Version, the New King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the English Standard Version.

Some translations, however, strive to convey the same meaning of the biblical text that it would have had to the original audience, even if the precise wording and/or sentence structure is changed. These “meaning-based” translations are referred to as “dynamic equivalence” translations. Some modern dynamic equivalence translations would be the Revised English Bible, the Good News Translation, the New Living Translation, and perhaps the New International Version.

Paraphrases of the Bible would include the Living Bible and Eugene Peterson’s rendering called *The Message*. However, *The Message* may actually be too free to be even called a paraphrase, although that is how it is usually designated.

In reality, a translation that is a perfect example of formal equivalence is seldom, if ever, a major Bible translation because a perfectly formal equivalence translation would be difficult to read and understand. So, all Bible translations employ dynamic equivalence to some degree. Formal equivalence translations translate literally when it is feasible to do so and to still make a comprehensible translation. Translations that are classified as dynamic equivalence translations tend to sacrifice literalness. Two modern English translations that attempt to strike a balance between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence

are the New International Version and the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

So, one reason KJV-only proponents favor the King James Version is that they hold to a “formal equivalence” philosophy of Bible translation.⁶⁹

A third rail that KJV-only proponents run on is the presumed godliness and superior linguistic skills of the KJV translators. To compare the godliness of the KJV translators with that of contemporary translators is futile because the KJV translators are dead and because God alone knows the hearts of men. As to knowledge and linguistic skills, modern scholars know more about the Greek of the New Testament today than did the KJV translators. This wasn’t due to any intellectual deficiency on their part, but rather it is due to discoveries since that time of more ancient manuscripts and greater knowledge of the Greek language.

If one wanted to argue for the superiority of the Greek text underlying the King James Version and if one wanted to argue for a formal equivalence philosophy of Bible translation and if one were willing to acknowledge the futility of attempting to pit the godliness of the KJV translators against that of more recent Bible translators, then the clear winner for an English Bible translation for the KJV-only advocate would be the New King James Version of the Bible. But this is not the case.

There is a fourth rail for the KJV-only advocate and that might be the belief that God had His hand in a special way on the KJV translation or that the KJV translation is somehow divinely inspired or that God has blessed the KJV translation in a singular way in history or any number of other reasons, at least some of which are not subject to rational discussion. For whatever reasons, many KJV-only advocates believe the KJV translation is singularly the Word of God simply as a matter of blind faith, and not due to any rational basis. And if they were content to merely have this as their own personal conviction before God, the discussion of their position here might not be necessary. The reason it

is necessary, however, is because many KJV-only proponents try to “poison the well” for those who read any other translation of the Bible by arguing that the only true English Bible is the King James Bible, and all other English translations either somehow fall short of being the Word of God — or that they are corrupt translations, New Age translations, or Satanic. They have made the use of the King James Version a test of Christian orthodoxy.

A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF THE KJV-ONLY POSITION

In an article some years ago in *The Quarterly Journal*, senior PFO researcher G. Richard Fisher traced the origins of the contemporary KJV-only controversy back to a Seventh-day Adventist professor, Benjamin G. Wilkinson, who, in 1930, wrote a defense of the King James Version, titled *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated*.⁷⁰ (The “Authorized Bible” that Wilkinson referred to is the “Authorized Version,” i.e., the King James Version.)

Fisher wrote that decades later this largely unknown book by Wilkinson⁷¹ was subsequently promoted by the late KJV proponent David Otis Fuller in his book, *Which Bible?*⁷² The last portion of *Which Bible?* consisted of a lengthy, edited abridgment of Wilkinson’s book *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated*.⁷³ Fisher cites author Doug Kutilek’s claim that Wilkinson’s defense of the King James Version was riddled with errors.⁷⁴ Fisher also points out that in *Which Bible?*, Fuller seems to have deliberately hidden Wilkinson’s Seventh-day Adventist roots.⁷⁵

Thus, Fisher concludes that “the real ‘father’” of the contemporary KJV-only movement was the Seventh-day Adventist professor Benjamin G. Wilkinson (along with his chief promoter, David Otis Fuller).⁷⁶

Someone else who has been cited many times by KJV-only advocates (including Wilkinson)⁷⁷ in support of their position is the 19th-century textual critic and Anglican Dean of Chichester, John William Burgon, even though Burgon was not actually

a KJV-only advocate! As noted earlier, Burgon advocated a position that is somewhat similar, though not identical, to the KJV-only position. So, although he was definitely *not* a KJV-only advocate, KJV-only proponents love to cite him because of the *similarity* of his view to their own.

A current example of Burgon being used to support a view that was not identical to his own is that of KJV-only advocate, D.A. Waite, who founded the KJV-only organization called The Dean Burgon Society. Waite also distributes materials written by Burgon. However, New Testament textual critic Daniel Wallace, mentioned above, wrote, “It is ironic that the Dean Burgon Society is one that Burgon himself would be excluded from, since Burgon’s views were closer to [the] majority text than [to the] TR [i.e., Textus Receptus].”⁷⁸

Thus, although Burgon was not a KJV-only proponent, they seem to have adopted him as their mentor. As Fisher pointed out in his article, Wilkinson actually *was* a KJV proponent and, so, in this sense, we might regard him as the father of the KJV-only position. Perhaps the contemporary KJV-only movement has two fathers, instead of one. The one who they seem to willingly cite as one of their own, even though his position was only similar, though not identical to theirs (Burgon); and the other one who is less acknowledged, but who actually *was* a KJV proponent (Wilkinson).

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE KJV: A RESPONSE TO THE KJV-ONLY POSITION

Some of the reasons that the King James Version needed a major overhaul are explained in the Preface of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. It states:

“The King James Version of the New Testament was based upon a Greek text that was marred by mistakes, containing the accumulated errors of fourteen centuries of manuscript copying. It was essentially the Greek text of the New Testament as edited by

[Theodore] Beza, 1589,⁷⁹ who closely followed that published by Erasmus, 1516-1535, which was based upon a few medieval manuscripts. The earliest and best of the eight manuscripts which Erasmus consulted was from the tenth century, and he made the least use of it because it differed most from the commonly received text; Beza had access to two manuscripts of great value, dating from the fifth and sixth centuries, but he made very little use of them because they differed from the text published by Erasmus. We now possess many more ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, and are far better equipped to seek to recover the original wording of the Greek text. The evidence for the text of the books of the New Testament is better than for any other ancient book, both in the number of extant manuscripts and in the nearness of the date of some of these manuscripts to the date when the book was originally written.”⁸⁰

So, one reason that the King James Version needed revision was because recent discoveries provided more ancient Greek manuscripts than the KJV translators had access to when they made their 1611 translation.

The RSV Preface also gives another reason for a revision of the KJV:

“A major reason for revision of the King James Version, which is valid for both the Old Testament and the New Testament, is the change since 1611 in English usage. Many forms of expression have become archaic, while still generally intelligible — the use of thou, thee, thy, thine and the verb endings -est and -edst, the verb endings -eth and -th, it came to pass that, whosoever, whatsoever, insomuch that, because that, for that, unto, howbeit, peradventure, holden, aforetime, must needs, would fain, behooved, to you-ward, etc. Other words are obsolete and no longer understood by the common reader. The greatest prob-

lem, however, is presented by the English words which are still in constant use but now convey a different meaning from that which they had in 1611 and in the King James Version. These words were once accurate translations of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures; but now, having changed in meaning, they have become misleading. They no longer say what the King James translators meant them to say. Thus, the King James Version uses the word 'let' in the sense of 'hinder,' 'prevent' to mean 'precede,' 'allow' in the sense of 'approve,' 'communicate' for 'share,' 'conversation' for 'conduct,' 'comprehend' for 'overcome,' 'ghost' for 'spirit,' 'wealth' for 'well-being,' 'allege' for 'prove,' 'demand' for 'ask,' 'take no thought' for 'be not anxious,' etc."⁸¹

Some English words used in the KJV are old-fashioned, although perhaps still understandable, at least by some. Other English words are "obsolete" and thus, may not be understood by the modern reader. Other English words no longer mean what they did in 1611. Today's reader of the KJV might *think* some of the words mean one thing when in reality they mean something else.

Evangelist Ralph Woodrow similarly comments about the King James Version that "in time I have come to realize that using wording that is now obsolete really serves no effective purpose."⁸²

And later in the same article, he astutely observes:

"We should keep in mind that even if the KJV were an absolutely perfect English translation in A.D. 1611, it would not be perfect now. The reason is obvious: In 400 years many words vary or change in meaning."⁸³

Woodrow then illustrates this with examples from the King James Version. Here are three of his examples from the KJV,⁸⁴ along with two more that I read a number of years ago. These illustrations from the KJV are

immediately followed by the same Scripture from the more up-to-date New King James Version:

KJV: "Stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong" (1 Corinthians 16:13).

NKJV: "Stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong."

KJV: "we fetched a compass" (Acts 28:13).

NKJV: "we circled round." (As Woodrow points out, when Acts was written, the navigational compass hadn't yet been invented.⁸⁵)

KJV: "he who now letteth will let" (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

NKJV: "He [or "he'"] who now restrains will do so."

KJV: "Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia" (2 Corinthians 8:1).

NKJV: "Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia"

KJV: "Be careful for nothing" (Philippians 4:6).

NKJV: "Be anxious for nothing."

Several other illustrations of obsolete and confusing KJV wording could be given. For example, James 5:11 says, "that the Lord is very pitiful," and Psalm 47:2 declares, "For the LORD most high is terrible." Again, to cite Woodrow:

"One writer has said, 'I recommend the KJV for any reader who is 350 years old or older. All others would do better with a more recent version.'"⁸⁶

The reasons given above merely scratch the surface of the reasons that the KJV-only position is rationally untenable.

It is regrettable that those who hold to a KJV-only position have caused the confusion, turmoil, slander of fellow believers, strife, dissension, and division within the Body of Christ that they have. Surely these bad fruits alone are enough to show that this

controversy is a work of the flesh and not a work of God's Holy Spirit.

In truth, the KJV-only controversy is "a tempest in a teapot." The choice of a Bible translation should not be a matter of division among Christians. There are enough *real* battles for Christians to fight. While the original autographs were perfect, no translation of God's Word is 100 percent perfect. Yet most major Bible translations are God's Word (with the exception of purposely perverted translations such as those mentioned earlier), and they should be regarded in that way.

Romans 14 contains the antidote to this controversy:

"Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:4-5).

And later, in the same chapter, Paul writes:

"Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way" (Romans 14:13).

And God's Word also instructs us to "avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all" (2 Timothy 2:23-24).

While there are KJV-only proponents who are very intelligent, and some even hold earned doctorates, the *controversy itself* is truly a "foolish dispute." And God tells us to avoid such foolish disputes, because all that results from them is strife, which is, indeed, what has occurred as a direct result of this controversy.

In conclusion, we should say that if a person chooses to use the King James Bible as their preferred Bible translation, let them do so, provided that they are able to understand it. In this regard, the Preface of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible is on target when it closes with these

words, which are laden with meaning:

“The Bible is more than a historical document to be preserved. And it is more than a classic of English literature to be cherished and admired. It is a record of God’s dealing with men, of God’s revelation of Himself and His will. It records the life and work of Him in whom the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among men. The Bible carries its full message, not to those who regard it simply as a heritage of the past or praise its literary style, but to those who read it that they may discern and understand God’s Word to men. That Word must not be disguised in phrases that are no longer clear, or hidden under words that have changed or lost their meaning. It must stand forth in language that is direct and plain and meaningful to people today. It is our hope and our earnest prayer that this Revised Standard Version of the Bible may be used by God to speak to men in these momentous times, and to help them to understand and believe and obey his Word.”⁸⁷

Let us thank God for the good influence of the King James Version of His Word for the past 400 years. Indeed, thanks be to God for the King James Version of the Bible and for all faithful translations of His Word, not just in English, but in so many different languages!

Endnotes:

1. More information on the activities at these different venues can be found at the Website: www.kjv400celebration.com/events.php.
2. David Teems, *Majestie: The King Behind the King James Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010, pp. 152, 154. References to the “Millenary Petition” appear in different sources as capitalized or in small letters. Because it appears to be a proper name, I have capitalized it here and in a subsequent reference to it.
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 153.
4. Adam Nicholson, *God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005, pp. 54-55.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 41.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 45.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 47.
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 48.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-52.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 53.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 55.
14. *Majestie*, op. cit., pg. 168, italic in original.
15. *God’s Secretaries*, op. cit., pg. 57.
16. *Majestie*, op. cit., pg. 168.
17. Nicholson states, “The names of fifty of the Translators are recorded.” *God’s Secretaries*, op. cit., pg. 251. Teems agrees with Nichols, stating, “Only fifty names are recorded.” *Majestie*, op. cit., pg. 171.
18. In the 1611 KJV, “the apocrypha” was a group of nine extra books (and some additional chapters of Esther and Daniel) that were mostly written during the 400-year period between the Old and New Testaments. Roman Catholic Bibles today contain six of these nine books (along with a small book called “Baruch”) interspersed among the books of their Old Testament. Catholics refer to these books as “deuterocanonical,” rather than the Protestant designation for them, “apocrypha.” At least since the first century A.D., they have not been a part of the Jewish canon of Scripture, and the Protestant Reformers, following the Jewish canon, rejected them as Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church only officially declared them to be Scripture during the Council of Trent in 1545-1563, a council convened to deal with issues raised by the Protestant Reformation. (Both the number of books and the books themselves in the Protestant and Roman Catholic New Testaments are identical, however.)
19. *God’s Secretaries*, op. cit., pg. 229.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 227, 228, second ellipsis in original.
21. Concerning the misprints of the words that Nicholson mentions, there is no reason to suppose that he means that these words were misprinted throughout the entire Bible. Each of these words may have only been misprinted once in the 1611 KJV Bible.
22. *God’s Secretaries*, op. cit., pg. 226, 227.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 229.
24. This information comes from the commemorative booklet, *KJV400: Celebrating the Legacy of the Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2010, n.p. (but if the pages were numbered, it would likely be pg. 22).
25. E-mail correspondences with Rick Norris from March 1-6, 2011 on file, bold emphasis and brackets in original. Also see Rick Norris, *Today’s KJV and 1611 Compared and More*. Statesville, N.C.: Unbound Scriptures Publications, 2006, pp. 52-54. Title available as a booklet or download at www.lulu.com.
26. Ron Rhodes, *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 2009, pg. 73, italic in original. Rhodes cites Daniel B. Wallace, “The Reign of the King James (The Era of Elegance),” downloaded from www.bible.org.
27. Ralph Woodrow, “King James Only?” Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, Palm Springs, Calif., August 2009, pg. 4. Document accessed at: www.ralphwoodrow.org/articles/king-james-only.pdf.
28. The following English Bible translations and their dates are taken from Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001, pp. 56-67.
29. Metzger notes that this was the first “authorized” English Bible, *ibid.*, pg. 62.
30. Metzger notes that this was the second “authorized” English Bible, *ibid.*, pg. 67.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
32. *KJV400: Celebrating the Legacy of the Bible*, op. cit., n.p. (but if the pages were numbered, it would likely be pg. 19), italics in original.
33. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible was a revision of the 1901 American Standard Version of the Bible. The ASV, in turn, was an American revision of the 1881-1885 (English) Revised Version of the Bible, and this Revised Version was a revision of the King James Bible.
34. Preface to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Document accessed at: www.nccusa.org/newbtu/aboutsv.html.
35. Preface to the New King James Version of the Bible. Document accessed at: http://assets.cambridge.org/9780521706193/frontmatter/9780521706193_frontmatter.pdf. Page 6 of the PDF file.
36. Bernard M. Levinson and Joshua A. Berman, *The King James Bible at 400*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, n.d., pg. 9.
37. Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611-2011*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010, pp. 205-208.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 204.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 204-205.
41. *KJV400: Celebrating the Legacy of the Bible*, op. cit., n.p. (if the pages were numbered, it would likely be pg. 15).
42. *Ibid.*
43. From a transcript of The John Ankerberg Show, entitled, “Which English Translation of the Bible Is Best For Christians To Use Today?: Series 1.” Chattanooga, Tenn.: The Ankerberg Theological Research Institute, 1995, pg. 1. John Ankerberg here questions KJV-only advocate Dr. Samuel Gipp: “So if a guy is in Russia and he really wants to get to the truth of the Word of God, would he have to learn English?” to which Gipp replies: “Yes.”
44. Perhaps the most thorough *Quarterly Journal* article on this subject was G.

Richard Fisher, "The Cultic Root System of David Otis Fuller & King James Onlyism," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2004, pp. 4, 10-13; other Personal Freedom Outreach responses to this issue include G. Richard Fisher, "Ruckmanism or Wreckmanism: The Teaching That K.J.V. Translators Were Inspired Is Dangerous," *Personal Freedom Outreach Newsletter* (the former name of *The Quarterly Journal*), April-June 1982, pp. 1, 5; also, G. Richard Fisher, "The Big Chick Attack," *Personal Freedom Outreach Newsletter*, January-March 1986, pg. 2.

45. For example, *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations*, op. cit., pp. 247-253, where Rhodes discusses both of these corrupt "translations."

46. Harold Rawlings, "The Noblest Monument of English Prose," *Bible Baptist Tribune*, March 2011, pg. 10.

47. Steven Houck, *The King James Version of the Bible*. Lansing, Ill.: Peace Protestant Reformed Church, 1991, pg. 16, italics in original.

48. *The Bible in Translation*, op. cit., pg. 76.

49. Ibid.

50. "King James Only?," op. cit., pg. 1, italics and capitalization in original. I would not agree with all of Woodrow's views, either in this article or elsewhere; however, he is "the king of common sense," in his discussions on various issues, and his discussion of the KJV-only controversy in this article is masterful.

51. As it has been historically understood, a textual critic is someone who uses various methods to try to determine the original text of the Scriptures. In a personal interview with Dr. Daniel Wallace on March 2, 2011, he illustrated what a small, specialized fraternity New Testament textual critics are, by saying that not too many years ago, there were fewer than 30 in the entire world. Furthermore, he said that today, there are no living New Testament textual critics who are KJV-only advocates, although there used to be one, Edward F. Hills, who has since died.

52. Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007, pp. 71-72, italic in original.

53. Ibid., pg. 87.

54. In an e-mail correspondence dated April 6, 2011, Dr. Wallace said that, although in the interview with Strobel, he cited the year "1707" here, he misspoke; and that instead it should be "the mid-1700s." I have inserted it here due to his correction of this point.

55. *The Case for the Real Jesus*, op. cit., pp. 88-89, italic in original.

56. From the personal interview with Dr. Wallace on March 2, 2011. Similarly, Christian author Eric Pement notes, "There is usually little objection [by KJV-only advocates] to modern translations of the Old Testament, because the Hebrew

(Masoretic) text used in 1611 is still considered the standard today." Eric Pement, "Gimme the Bible that Paul Used: A Look at the King James Only Debate." Document accessed at: www.bibletopics.com/biblestudy/82.htm. Likewise, in his work on the KJV-only controversy, New Testament scholar D.A. Carson states, "the textual matters I have dealt with [in this book] concern only the New Testament. The reasons for this are twofold. (1) The defenders of the TR [i.e., Textus Receptus] do not usually discuss Old Testament textual problems, and this book is largely a rebuttal." D.A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979, pg. 81.

57. James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009, pp. 23-28.

58. Jasper James Ray, *God Wrote Only One Bible*. Junction City, Ore.: The Eye Opener Publishers, 1970. See, for example, the last sentence of the book, where he concludes, "It is impossible to be saved without 'FAITH,'" and perfect-saving-faith can only be produced by the 'ONE' Bible God wrote, and that we find only in translations which agree with the Greek Textus Receptus refused by Westcott and Hort" (pg. 122, capitalization in original).

59. Personal interview with Dr. Wallace, March 2, 2011. Also, *The King James Only Controversy*, op. cit., pg. 25, footnote 2, where White also cites this same information from an article by Dr. Wallace.

60. *The King James Only Controversy*, op. cit., pg. 25, footnote 2.

61. "Dean" was Burgon's ecclesiastical title, not part of his name. (Burgon was an Anglican churchman.)

62. E-mail correspondence on file from Dr. Wallace, dated Feb. 12, 2011.

63. *The King James Only Controversy*, op. cit., pg. 25.

64. Ibid., pg. 26, bold and italic in the original.

65. Ibid., footnote #4, italics in the original.

66. G.A. Riplinger, *New Age Bible Versions*. Munroe Falls, Ohio: A.V. Publications, 1994.

67. See note #43 above for documentation.

68. My understanding of the first three "rails" is gleaned from the transcript of The John Ankerberg Show, entitled, "Which English Translation of the Bible Is Best For Christians To Use Today?: Series 2." Chattanooga, Tenn.: The Ankerberg Theological Research Institute, 1995, pp. 15-16, combined with my personal interview with Dr. Wallace on March 2, 2011, where he used the concept of the KJV-only position running on "rails."

69. KJV-only proponents are not the only Bible believers who favor a word-for-word translation, as can be seen by sales of New King James Bibles, New American

Standard Bibles, English Standard Version Bibles, etc. It seems to me that both formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence translations can together play a complementary role in giving a fuller understanding of the Scriptures. Of the two, I prefer a formal equivalence translation. One pitfall of dynamic equivalence translations is that they are, by their very nature, more interpretive than a formal equivalence translation. Additionally, for understanding the actual words of Scripture (i.e., the Word of God), a formal equivalence translation has a clear advantage over a dynamic equivalence translation.

70. "The Cultic Root System of David Otis Fuller & King James Onlyism," op. cit., pp. 10-13. Fisher's acknowledged sources for this were two pieces by Doug Kutilek: The online article by Kutilek, "'Roots' of the KJV Controversy - The Unlearned Men: The True Genealogy and Genesis of King-James-Version-Onlyism." Document available at: www.kjv-only.com/doug/kjvoroots.html; and also the chapter by Kutilek in Roy E. Beacham and Kevin T. Bauder, General Editors, *One Bible Only?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2001, pp. 27-56.

71. Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated*. New York: TEACH Services, Inc., 2006.

72. David Otis Fuller, Editor, *Which Bible?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Institute for Biblical Textual Studies, 1998.

73. Ibid., pp. 175-318. Although Fuller's edited abridgement of Wilkinson's work officially begins on page 176, page 175 consists of Wilkinson's Foreword to his book.

74. "The Cultic Root System of David Otis Fuller & King James Onlyism," op. cit., pg. 11, citing Doug Kutilek's chapter in *One Bible Only?*, op. cit., pg. 44.

75. Ibid., pp. 10-11. On pg. 11, Fisher cites Kutilek, who also accused Fuller of hiding Wilkinson's Seventh-day Adventism in *One Bible Only?*, op. cit., pp. 45-46.

76. Ibid., pg. 10, 13.

77. *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated*, op. cit., where Wilkinson cites Burgon on pp. 17, 21-22, 23, 25, 84, 118, 205, 214-215, and 247.

78. E-mail correspondence on file from Dr. Wallace, dated Feb. 12, 2011.

79. Theodore Beza was an associate of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin.

80. Preface to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Document accessed at: www.nccusa.org/newbtu/aboutrv.html.

81. Ibid.

82. "King James Only?," op. cit., pg. 1.

83. Ibid., pg. 2.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid., pg. 4.

87. Preface to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, op. cit.