

# 7 things you may not know about the King James Bible

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*For Anne's friend.*

The King James Version of the Bible is a great translation and has helped countless thousands of people to find and know God, to receive his gift of salvation, and to effectively serve him and his people. The Bible was beautifully written by some of the best scholars of the day, and its reputation as fine literature is deserved.

Some Christians today maintain that the KJV is the superior English translation. Some Christians and churches are so enamoured with the KJV that they refuse to use, or give credit to, any other translation. The stance of these Christians has been referred to as King-James-Onlyism .

The KJV is an excellent English Bible and if you can easily understand it there is no real reason to change to another English translation. However, one of the biggest shortcomings for most people is its dated language.

The KJV uses many archaic words: words such as “jangling”, “subtil”, “privily”, and “holpen”, etc. And it uses archaic expressions that are unfamiliar to modern readers and audiences. For instance, how many people readily understand “Charity vaunteth not itself” ([1 Cor. 13:4c](#))? The earlier editions of the KJV also used spelling that is outdated, such as *sunne* for “sun”.

Furthermore, the edition of the KJV that is still commonly used contains several words which have changed in meaning over time. Words such as “flowers”, “suffer”, “vile”, “conversation” and “quit” convey a *very* different meaning to modern readers than was intended by the translators. (See [Lev. 15:24KJV](#); [Matt. 19:14KJV](#); [Phil. 3:20-21KJV](#); [1 Cor. 16:13KJV](#), etc.)

The fact that the KJV uses the word “unicorn” nine times (see [here](#) and [here](#)), and “satyr” twice ([Isa. 13:21KJV](#); [Isa. 34:14KJV](#)), is also problematic, as unicorns and satyrs are regarded as a mythological creatures rather than the real animals which are mentioned in the original Hebrew Scriptures and in more contemporary translations.

Apart from its dated language, there are a few other shortcomings of the KJV. KJV-only people seem unaware of these shortcomings. Moreover, many accept incorrect statements that are frequently made about the KJV. The following paragraphs contain seven pieces of information that some KJV-only Christians may not be aware of.

## **(1) The KJV was not the first English translation.**

A few King-James-Only Christians believe that the King James Bible was the first English translation of the Scriptures. This belief is incorrect. John Wycliffe's Bible was translated from Latin into English and hand copied in the 1400s. In 1526, almost 100 years before the KJV was first published, William Tyndale's English translation of the Greek New Testament was published. “After Tyndale's, a number of other versions were produced. Among them were the Coverdale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Great Bible [[authorised by Henry VIII](#)], the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops' Bible.”[1] In fact much of the KJV borrows heavily from earlier English translations, especially the Bishop's Bible.

## **(2) The KJV has been through several editions.**

Some King-James-Only Christians believe that the King James Bible perfectly preserved the Scriptures for all time. If this is the case there would have been no need for further edits. The current edition of the KJV is different from the original 1611 translation and several other early editions. “The KJV Bible we use today is actually based primarily on the major revision completed in 1769 – 158 years after the first edition.”[2]

## **(3) All early editions of the KJV contained the apocryphal books.**

The 1611 version, and all other editions of the KJV that were published for the next fifty years, contained the [Apocrypha](#). Protestant Christians do not regard the apocryphal books as uniquely inspired and authoritative. The 1666 edition was the first edition of the KJV that did *not* include these extra books.

## **(4) King James authorised the new Bible translation for political reasons.**

King James believed that a single ‘authorized version’ was a political and social necessity. He hoped this book would hold together the warring factions of the Church of England and the Puritans which threatened to tear apart both church and country. Most of the translators, however, were clergymen belonging to the Church of England, but at least some had Puritan sympathies.[3]

King James issued over a dozen rules that the translators had to follow. King James disliked the Geneva Bible, the Bible used by the Puritans, because he believed that some of the commentary in the margin notes did not show enough respect for kings.[4] James’ new translation was to have no commentary in the margins.

King James favoured the hierarchical structure of the Church of England and wanted the new translation to keep words that supported a bishop led hierarchy. In keeping with James’ preferred views on church government, he specified, “The old ecclesiastical words [are] to be kept; as the word *church* [is] not to be translated *congregation*.” (I personally believe that *congregation* is a better translation in some instances.) King James also ruled that only his new Bible could be read in England’s churches. The translation rules of King James can be found [here](#). The political motives of King James had a direct influence on the translation of the KJV.

## **(5) The translators of the KJV 1611 were untrained in Koine Greek.**

Koine (“common”) Greek is the original language of the New Testament. Koine Greek had been a dead language for over a thousand years when the KJV was published for the first time in 1611. The translators of the KJV didn’t even know what Koine Greek was. Some people believed that the Greek language of the NT was a unique, Spirit-inspired dialect.[5] It was not until the late 1800s and during the 1900s, when tens of thousands of papyri documents were discovered – many written in Koine, that we could begin to understand the language more fully.[6] Unlike the translators of the KJV, modern translators of the New Testament are scholars of Koine Greek.

## **(6) The KJV translation of the NT is based on relatively recent Greek manuscripts.**

As well as relying on previous English translations, the 1611 edition of the KJV relied on a critically edited Greek text that was “for the most part based on about half a dozen very late manuscripts (none earlier than the 12th century AD).”[7] These late manuscripts include editions of the Greek New Testament by Erasmus[8], as well as Robert Estienne’s (a.k.a. ‘Stephanus’) edition (1550) and Theodore Beza’s edition (1598). Unfortunately, one of the manuscripts Estienne and Beza used for their Greek editions contained a few “corrections” that downplayed the importance of women in the church.[9]

## **(7) The early editions of the KJV are not based on the Received Text.**

Most KJV advocates claim that the KJV was translated from a Greek text known as the Textus Receptus (TR) and that the TR is especially accurate and inspired. However the TR did not exist in 1611 when the first King James Bible was published. The first TR was written in the 1633. “The TR used today is normally the one created by Scrivener in 1894, which took as its basis the English translation of the KJV, giving the reader the Greek textual choices made by the KJV translators.”[10] Conversely, most modern translations of the New Testament are based on critical texts which take into account much more ancient, and much less handled, Greek manuscripts. A few of these Greek manuscripts date from as early as the third century.

## **Other Criticisms and Considerations**

One of the criticisms leveled at some newer English translations is that the New Testament was translated from the Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament. However, the 2011 edition of the New International Version (NIV) is based on the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland/United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament which is a critical text that takes into consideration all known Greek manuscripts (and ancient lectionary quotes) of the New Testament.[11] Any criticism of the Westcott and Hort text, or the men themselves – and much of the criticism has been misleading and outright slander – has no relevance whatsoever to the latest edition of the NIV and other modern translations.

Another criticism of newer translations is that some words and phrases, and even a few passages, that are included in the KJV, are absent in newer translations. These are not omissions. Rather, these words and phrases are additions in the KJV. These additions are absent in the more ancient Greek manuscripts. Most modern translations still acknowledge the traditional additions in some way (e.g. in margin notes, in footnotes, or printed in a different font, etc).

The King James Version is an excellent translation, but I believe that many of the recent English translations to be better. I mostly read the New Testament in Greek, but the English Bibles I use, roughly in order of preference, are: the NIV (2011), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the King James Version (KJV). Most of the other, better known English translations are fine too.

It is most important that we read a Bible that we can understand. The New Testament was originally written in common, everyday Greek – a language that almost everyone in the Roman Empire (the world of the New Testament) could easily understand. We need modern English translations of the Bible that modern audiences can easily understand.