

Meaning, Understanding, and Bible Translations

Just 400 years ago some good Christian scholars brought out a new translation of the Bible.

They were a little apprehensive of what the public reaction would be. In fact they pleaded in their *Preface* for toleration, for understanding, for patience from those who had got used to a previous translation. They very plainly pointed out that they were not trying to set up a definitive standard and expected further revisions and translations—a more fitting phrase, a better mode of thought.

Many people were extremely offended at this new-fangled translation of the Bible and would have nothing to do with it. Some thought it heresy. For those who used the old Latin Bible this translation was anathema—the Bible in the common language of the day—how terribly confusing!

That's the very Bible that many still use today. The King James Version or Authorized Standard Version first appeared in 1611, and has remained substantially the same ever since. At the time it was a new Bible version written in modern language with the expectation it would be revised and adjusted to match the changing aspects of language.

So what of the KJV today? How does it fit in? To many people it remains the only Bible—the only authoritative version. You know the old story of the lady saying: “The King James was good enough for St. Paul, it's good enough for me!” But does it still speak as it used to? Do you find it easy to understand? Most importantly, what of people outside the church—how do they react?

Let me illustrate. Take a look at Philippians 1:22-27 KJV:

²² But if I live in the flesh, this *is* the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. ²³ For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: ²⁴ Nevertheless to abide in the flesh *is* more needful for you. ²⁵ And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; ²⁶ That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again. ²⁷ Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

Did you get it? Could you quickly and easily explain what Paul means here to a confused outside reader?

What about this “what I shall choose I wot not?” What wot is wot?

Who talks like that today? OK you may run to your dictionaries and read that this word “wot” is the present tense of the archaic verb to wit, meaning to know. You may then begin to understand a little. But the very construction of such old-time English is different to today—nobody would dream of talking about being in a strait betwixt two, or

that abiding in the flesh being more needful. We may recognize all the words, but the way they're put together doesn't make much sense today.

Even the words we do know can trap us—like conversation (v.27). It's nothing to do with having a chat! What does a modern version say? — Talks about *conduct*—the way we behave—which is what the word conversation meant in the 17th Century! And even if, after all that work of translating and decoding and deciphering the words and their structure, we then turn to the true meaning—what do we get?

It's almost as if we're telling people they have to learn a different language before they can find out about God!

Those of you who have struggled with Shakespeare have some idea of the issues. His language comes from the same period—rich, beautiful, moving—but also hard to understand without a lot of extra explanation. Not many of us would choose Shakespeare for bedtime reading without having done some in-depth study first!

Let me illustrate a little more. Try these few verses taken from various parts of KJV:

“He cropped off the top of his young twigs, and carried it into a land of traffick.” (Ez. 17:4). Did they have automobiles and gridlock way back then? What's with the twigs?

This is the description of the arrival of the queen of Sheba (1Ki. 10:2): “And she came to Jerusalem with a very great train.” Railroad lines? Most people reading that today would think she came by Amtrak...

“Divers weights and divers measures, both of them are alike abomination to the Lord. (Pr. 20:10). Rather hard on the Old Testament sub-aqua club?

No—it's just that words slowly change their meaning in a language. There's an alteration in the way we express ourselves. That's why 400 year old language can be so hard to follow.

- What about the *wimples and the crisping pins* in Isaiah 3:22?
- What about the *tabering* in Nahum 2:7?
- What's a *glede* in Deuteronomy 14:13?
- What is a *noisome* pestilence Ps. 91:3—is it a loud disease?
- What of the *plats* of 2 Kings 9:26; the *strakes* of Lev. 14:37, the *knops* of Ex. 25:36?

Does it really matter? Yes it does. For if the Bible is not understood, or if it has become a kind of mystic code book or an outdated set of rules or a magic charm then it has ceased to be the Word of God to us today. .

For most people today, the KJV which we admire and revere as expressing in beautiful language the message of salvation, that wonderful old book—is a *closed* book.

Even if they try, they can't understand it, and many of us don't do much better. All the thees and thous, the wots and the trows, the whereinsoevers and the heretofores, the withals and the notwithstanding have clouded the message. Like legal documents with all their impenetrable language, we can't see past the words...

For above all else, we need to *understand* the Bible. We must see and know and comprehend the message it contains. And we can't do that as long as we stay mired in the language of the 17th century. I've heard people explaining the KJV who have come out with the exact opposite of the original meaning. No fault of the KJV. The fault lies with us for not speaking the same language any more.

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Greek, in words that were readily understandable to the people concerned. While the thoughts the Bible contains are very deep, the words used to express them are simple. If you take a translation in modern English it is not hard to follow, you don't spend time looking up archaic words in a dictionary, and you don't have to keep on turning to a commentary to find out what it's saying.

It may not be in so majestic language. It may not have the familiar ring of words. But at least it's understandable.

I once read a story of a woman who had managed to memorize the whole of the Bible—a real feat of memory. Whatever Bible passage she was asked her to quote, she could recite it word for word. People were amazed by this achievement. But when she was asked what the passage meant the lady confessed she had no idea. While she knew the actual words, she could not explain their meaning. To her too the Bible was an unintelligible book.

In 1 Cor. 14:19, 20 (TEV) Paul says, “in church worship I would rather speak five words that can be understood, in order to teach others, than speak thousands of words in strange tongues.”

He is of course speaking about the use of tongues—but the principle applies here too. For so many people the Bible is written in an unknown tongue, in language they can't understand. Words that even those of us who are used to Bible study don't know:

Ez. 35:6. “sith thou hast not hated blood.” *Sith*—what's that?

Ps. 83:8 “they have holpen the children of Lot.” *Holpen*?

Josh. 11:6 “thou shalt hough their horses.” *Hough*—I don't even know how to say it. Does it rhyme with cough or slough or though?

What is the point in speaking ten thousand words that nobody understands?

What is the aim of language? To communicate! To get something across. To be understood. And that's why Paul would rather say five words with understanding.

Like:

In the beginning God created. 5 words

God so loved the world. 5 words.

Believe in the Lord Jesus. 5 words.

For I will come again. 5 words.

You know how hard it is to communicate with someone who doesn't speak your language. It can be funny, but it's always frustrating. I remember being in Switzerland and stopping to ask a little boy to fill up my bottle so I could have a drink of water. I couldn't remember the German for water. So I go through all the motions, showing that I want to drink, and muttering, "Water, water." But it took so long for him to understand. Then he just said, "Ach, *wasser*," and ran inside to fill up my bottle!

Then we can even use the same language and not be understood. We speak to others about our beliefs and they look blankly. They don't understand the terms we use. We show them the KJV and they can't read it unless we explain it to them. We often can't understand it either! We're in trouble!

I believe God wants us to read his book with understanding. He wants us to know what he is telling us. So if you can't understand the translation you're reading, then get one you can. In the end God is not worried about beautiful language or glorious poetry or traditional phrases—he just wants to be understood! Someone once asked a friend of mine what was the best translation. "The one you read," was his reply.

We call the Bible God's word, and so it is. The Bible is God speaking to us, you and me. Most of all, God wants us to understand what he's saying to us. He wants his words to be clear and easily comprehended. He wants to talk to us in language we can relate to.

I'm sure God doesn't want be seen as going around like a Shakespearean actor, muttering about being "overcharged with surfeiting" (Lk. 21:34) or "waxing gross" (Mt. 13:15) or the "motions of sins" (Rom. 7:5) or "bowels of mercies" (Col. 3:12).

No. Quite the contrary. At the end of Luke's gospel, the good news for us, Jesus did something tremendously significant. Talking about Jesus and the disciples it says that he "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." (Lk. 24:45 TEV). He points to his words to them throughout their time together. He opens the Bible with them. He opens their understanding!

Then, on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, Jesus doesn't reveal himself to the two disciples, but he "explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures, beginning with the books of Moses and the writings of all the prophets." (Lk. 24:27 TEV). Meaning. Explanation. Understanding.

God wants us to understand him. He has things of vital importance to say to us. So let's give him a chance and read words we can understand. May the Spirit of truth lead you into all truth and understanding, for Jesus' sake.

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