

In my Introduction to the New Testament undergraduate class this semester, I have told the students that they can use most any Bible translation they want, but I prefer the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and I do **not** want them using either a paraphrase or the King James. Some of them want to know why, and so I explain to them. Here is a post on the topic from almost exactly five years ago. (Note: I'm talking about undergraduates; my graduate students read the NT in Greek) (and also note: despite what I say about the NIV I certainly allow students to use it in class, since it is the most popular translation on college campuses today)

I have indicated that my preferred translation is the NRSV. Everyone, of course, has their favorite. My judgment is that among main-line, serious biblical scholars, the NRSV is far and away the preferred translation. But it is not so among general readers. I believe the King James Bible (the KJV) (or its slight revision: The New King James) and the New International Version (NIV) are better sellers among the population at large. So let me say a few words about these two. (Some readers of this blog will want to write to me to ask what I think of their own preferred translation: the Jerusalem Bible; the New English Version; the New American Standard Bible; etc etc. Most of the time I tell them that it's fine. It just isn't the one that I think is the best)

First: The King James. Published in 1611, the KJV (or "Authorized Version" as it was called, since it was a translation "authorized" by the head of the Anglican Church - guess who? King James of England), is one of the great classics of the English language and ought to be read and learned by everyone. If you want to read a fascinating account of the making of the KJV, see Adam Nicolson's terrific study, [God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible](#).

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Even though it is a great piece of English literature, the KJV is not a great study Bible. That is for a couple of reasons. First, when the KJV translators were doing their work at the beginning of the 17th century, they did not have access to most of the thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament that have been discovered and studied in the intervening centuries. As a result, especially for the NT, the KJV is based on poor manuscripts, and that has a serious effect on the translation. The KJV includes numerous passages that were not originally part of the NT and altered forms of yet other passages (most famously: the "final twelve verses" of Mark; the story of the woman taken in adultery in John; the passage affirming the Trinity in 1 John 5:7-8; etc.). Not good, if you want to know what Mark, John, Paul, etc. "originally" wrote.

Second, as much as people (somewhat ignorantly) want to deny it, the English language has changed dramatically over the past four hundred years. There are places where the KJV just doesn't seem to make sense in our modern language. Worse, there are places where the words do seem to make sense, but in fact they meant something different in 1611 from what they mean today. As just one of my favorite examples: in Revelation 17 the prophet has a vision of the horrid "Whore of Babylon" who is a terrible and frightening figure seated on a beast with seven heads and ten horns, and who is "drunk with the blood of the martyrs

of Jesus.” And after the author describes this horrific woman, he says that he “looked upon her with great admiration.” (!) 400 years ago “admiration” meant “astonishment.” It doesn’t carry the same meaning today, leading to a very real possibility that someone reading the passage may be more than a bit confused.

Second: the NIV. I will admit that the NIV is a very, very readable translation, and that it was produced by some very fine scholars. The problem is that to be on the NIV translation committee a scholar had to be a committed evangelical Christian with specific views about the infallibility of the Bible (I don’t recall just now the specific doctrinal statement on the Bible that they had to sign off on, but it involved a high view of biblical inspiration). That means that there was one perspective on the Bible represented on the committee, and it had a real effect on translation decisions that were made.

Rather than spell out the differences for you, I’ll suggest that if you’re really interested, you just do an exercise yourself. Compare the three accounts of Paul’s conversion in Acts 9, 22, and 26 in the NRSV and notice the detailed differences; then do the same thing with the NIV, and see if any of these differences have been smoothed over. Or do the same thing with the sale of Joseph by his brothers to the Midianites (or was it the Ishmaelites?) in Genesis 37.

My view is that a Bible translation should not be driven by a theological view of the text but by the science of philology, and that translating the Bible is in principle no different from translating Homer, Plato, Epictetus, or Ignatius of Antioch. The translation should be made with an eye of communicating in the new language the words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of the original language, as readably, but also as accurately, as possible. I think the NRSV does this better than most, if not all, the other translations.



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