

# Lessons from the Preface, “The Translators to the Reader,” of the KJV 1611<sup>1</sup>

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The 1611 King James Version contained a preface entitled “The Translators to the Reader,” which contained a defense of as well as a brief explanation of their work. It is generally agreed that Dr. Miles Smith, one of the key figures in the production of the KJV, is the author of the preface. For many years it has not generally been included in printed editions. Now it is readily available on the Internet, typically in versions with updated spelling and typography and in some cases in modernized language.<sup>2</sup> The preface is very helpful in identifying the view of the translators on various issues relevant to the text and version debate.

First, the preface reveals that the translators expected much opposition to the KJV, and they did receive a lot of criticism. They write, “Zeal to promote the common good, whether it be devising any thing ourselves, or revising that which hath been laboured by others, deserveth certainly much respect and esteem, but yet findeth cold entertainment [reception] in the world. It is welcomed with suspicion instead of love, and with emulation [disparagement] instead of thanks.”<sup>3</sup>

The KJV caught on slowly, and many of the translators themselves for years to come quoted out of the former versions, and the Geneva Bible continued to be the Bible of the common people until 1660. Some “accused the translators of blasphemy and called them ‘damnable corruptors’ of God’s word. The Pilgrims who came to this country in 1620 refused to have anything to do with the King James Version”<sup>4</sup> The preface again addresses the issue of opposition: “Many men’s mouths have been open a good while (and yet are not stopped) with speeches about the translation so long in hand, or rather perusals of translations made before: and ask what may be the reason, what the necessity, of the employment [effort]. Hath the Church been deceived, say they, all this while? . . . Was their translation good before? Why do they now mend it? Was it not good? Why then was it obruded to [foisted on] the people? . . . We will answer them . . . thus with *St. Hierome* [Jerome]. . . . ‘Do we condemn the ancient? In no case: but after the endeavours of them that were before us, we take the best pains we can in the house of God.’”<sup>5</sup>

Second, the translators believed in the value of revisions of translations. Answering the charge from the Catholics that the English Bibles were corrected too many times, the translators answered, “Yet before we end, we must answer a third cavil [complaint] and objection of theirs against us, for altering and amending our Translations so oft; wherein truly they deal hardly and strangely with us. For to whom ever was it imputed for a fault (by such as were wise) to go over that which he had done, and to amend it where he saw cause? . . . If we will be sons of the truth, we must consider what it speaketh, and trample upon our own

credit, yea and upon other men’s too, if either be any way a hindrance to it.”<sup>6</sup>

Third, the translators believed that only the original manuscripts of the prophets and apostles were inspired and without error. Quoting Justin Martyr, the translators write, “We must know by all means (saith he) that it is not lawful (or possible) to learn (any thing) of God or of right piety, save only out of the Prophets, who teach us by divine inspiration.”<sup>7</sup> They continue, “And what marvel? the original thereof being from heaven, not from earth; the author being God, not man; the inditer, the Holy Spirit, not the wit of the Apostles or Prophets; the penmen, such as were sanctified from the womb, and endued with a principal portion of God’s Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> Again, they emphasize the point, “For whatever was perfect under the sun, where Apostles or apostolick men, that is, men endued with an extraordinary measure of God’s Spirit and privileged with the privilege of infallibility, had not their hand?”<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, the translators viewed translations, even though imperfect, as the Word of God. “Now to the latter [our adversaries] we answer, that we do not deny, nay, we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English set forth by men of our profession [by Protestants] (for we have seen none of theirs as yet [i.e., no English translation by Catholics]) containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God.” They continue, “No cause therefore why the word translated should be denied to be the word, or forbidden to be current, notwithstanding that some imperfections and blemishes may be noted in the setting forth of it.”<sup>10</sup>

Fifth, the translators believe that alternative readings and text variations should be included in the margins. They believed that God’s people needed the truth, so they included many alternate readings and text possibilities,<sup>11</sup> leaving the reader to decide if a margin reading fits better than the one in the text or, at least, alerting the reader to the fact that certain readings are not without question.

Some peradventure would have no variety of senses to be set in the margin, lest the authority of the Scriptures for deciding of controversies by that show of uncertainty should somewhat be shaken. But we hold their judgment not to be so sound in this point. For though, “whatsoever things are necessary are manifest,” as S. Chrysostome saith; and, as S. Augustine [says], “in those things that are plainly set down in the Scriptures all such matters are found that concern faith, hope, and charity: yet for all that it cannot be dissembled [disguised] that partly to exercise and whet our wits [to sharpen our minds], partly to wean the curious from loathing of them [the Scriptures] for their very plainness, partly also to stir up our devotion to crave the

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assistance of God’s Sprit by prayer, and lastly, that we might be forward to seek aid of our brethren by conference . . . it hath pleased God in his Divine Providence here and there to scatter words and sentences of that difficulty and doubtfulness, not in doctrinal points that concern salvation . . . but on matters of less moment.”<sup>12</sup>

With regard to rare words in the original Greek and Hebrew, the translators explain,

Now in such a case doth not a margin do well to admonish the Reader to seek further, and not to conclude or dogmatize upon this or that peremptorily? For as it is a fault of incredulity, to doubt of those things that are evident; so to determine of such things as the Spirit of God hath left (even in the judgment of the judicious) questionable, can be no less than presumption. Therefore as S. *Augustine* saith, that variety of translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense of the Scriptures: so diversity of signification and sense in the margin, where the text is not so clear, must needs be good; yea, is necessary, as we are persuaded.<sup>13</sup>

The translators, in other words, did not claim perfection for the text they produced. They realized that there were places where the translation in the text was uncertain and that future clarifications and corrections would be inevitable and helpful.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted and adapted from the author’s chapter, “The Making of the King James Version,” in *From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International), 129–45. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> The version of the preface quoted here is from F.H.A. Scrivener, *The Cambridge Paragraph Bible of the Authorized English Version* (Cambridge: University Press, 1873), cv–cxviii (available online at the Open Library [https://openlibrary.org/books/OL22863009M/The\\_Cambridge\\_paragraph\\_Bible\\_of\\_the\\_authorized\\_English\\_version](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL22863009M/The_Cambridge_paragraph_Bible_of_the_authorized_English_version)), accessed July 24, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Scrivener, cv.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Earle, *How We Got Our Bible* (Kansas City: Beacon Hall Press of Kansas City, 1971), 76.

<sup>5</sup> Scrivener, cxi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, cxiv.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, cvii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, cviii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, cxiii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> According to Scrivener (xxiv–xxv, xxx), the 1611 contains 6637 marginal notes in the Old Testament, of which 2156 give alternate translations and an additional 67 refer to variants in the original texts. Of 765 marginal notes in the New Testament, 35 have to do with textual variants.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, cxvi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, cxvii.