

Is the King James Version the Best Version of the Bible?

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There are many English translations of the Bible. Different people will defend different translations for different reasons. Ever since the King James Version (KJV) was published in 1611, there have been avid supporters of the KJV saying it is the only version that should be accepted, or at least that it is the best. Some King James Bibles claim to be the God-ordained version of the Holy Scriptures. Some have just argued that the methods of translation that led to the KJV are simply the best. This article will examine that to see if any of those ideas is the case. But, it is probably good to back up and understand exactly how we got from what Paul and other writers of the New Testament wrote to our modern day translations. It is important to note that the discussion in this paper will be exclusively talking about the New Testament and the Greek manuscripts we translate it from.

From Paul's Pen to Our Modern Translations

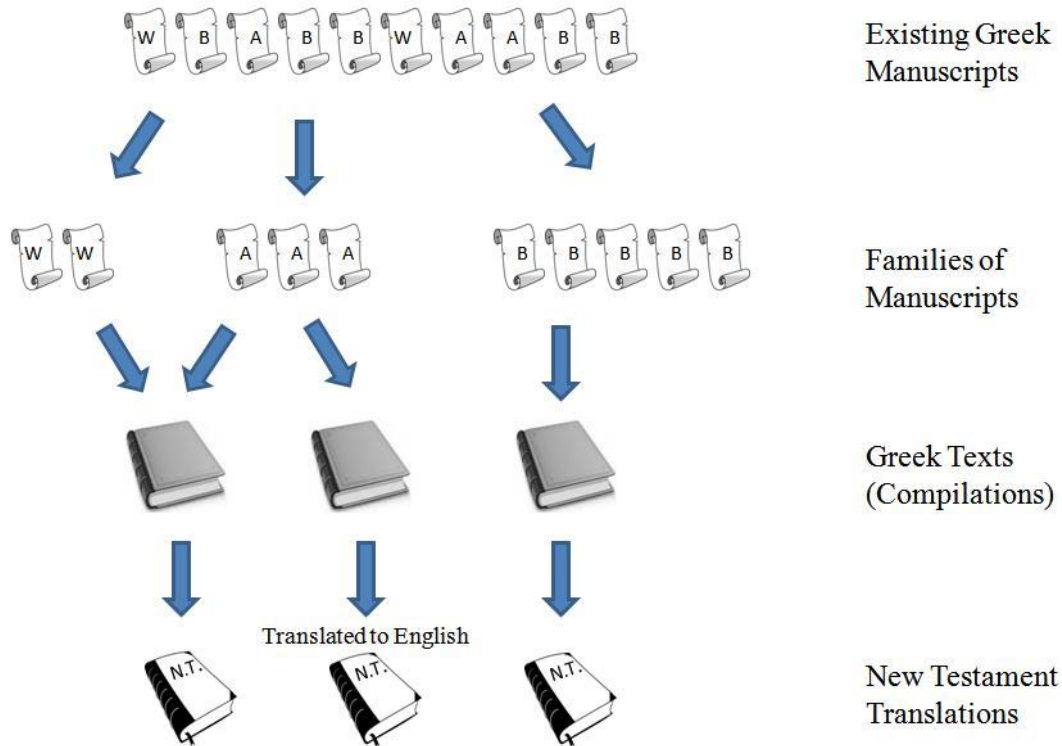
The New Testament was originally written in ancient "Koine" (or commonly spoken) Greek. There are many different English translations of the Greek. The most common ones that I see among conservative Christians today are the King James Version (KJV), the New King James Version (NKJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the English Standard Version (ESV). All of the versions are considered "formal equivalence" or close to word-for-word translations. However, there is more involved than the translation itself. We do not have any of the original writings of any of the New Testament. Like most ancient writings, we only have copies. There are well over 5000 existing Greek manuscripts that include varying amounts of the New Testament. Some have just a fragment of a book, while some have the entire New Testament. This is good news in that it gives us confidence in the preservation of the Scriptures. The problem is that these are all hand written copies and all contain variants (i.e. mistakes). When one manuscript differs from another in any way it is considered a variant. The short version of the story is that while this is definitely something to be noted, it does not mean we are completely lost. In a majority of cases it is easy to conclude what the original said. A vast majority of variants are insignificant and are simply omissions of letters or word order differences. Scholars Wescott and Hort estimated that we can be confident that we know the original reading in 98% of the NT text.

With all that said, there have been many translations of the NT, but generally all follow a similar process. First, manuscripts have been divided into "families" that tend to read the same when there is a variant. The three main families are the Byzantine, Alexandrian, and Western. Next, from one or more of those families (or certain manuscripts from the families) Greek scholars will compile a Greek text. Some examples of these compilations are the Textus Receptus, Wescott and Hort, and "Novum Testamentum Graece" by Nestle and Alond. Translators will, then, typically take a Greek compilation as the basis for their translation and for the most part translate directly from that. (see chart below) The KJV and NKJV are based on the Textus Receptus. While almost all other translations used today like the NASB and ESV are based on Nestle and Alond's work.

Since different translations are a result of a different variation of this process then they will all have different strengths and weaknesses. So, is the KJV the authoritative version of the NT? There are three main arguments KJV defenders will give. This article will show that the neither

the Textus Receptus, the Majority Text method, nor the argument of divine ordination make the KJV the best translation.

How Manuscripts Become Translations



(This chart does not intend to reflect specific translations, Greek texts, or manuscripts. It is an illustration intended to help the reader understand the process, not to give exact details of what happened.)

Problems with the Textus Receptus

The KJV was translated from the Textus Receptus (TR) and so any weakness in the TR will be reflected in the KJV. There are several problems with the TR. There was never a definitive “Textus Receptus” edition. The TR is a series of Greek texts that originated from a text compiled by a man named Erasmus in 1516. Erasmus had just a handful of Greek manuscripts and though in the subsequent versions there were more manuscripts taken into consideration, there were still just a few Medieval Greek manuscripts that were used and almost all of which were from the Byzantine family. In its day, the Textus Receptus was a good compilation and the KJV offered a better translation than the world had yet seen. Since then, however, there have been more manuscripts discovered that are older and better than the ones used to compile the TR and produce the KJV including the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus which both date to the 4th century AD and contain almost the entire Old and New Testaments.

The TR, and thus the KJV, largely (though not exclusively) reflects the Byzantine family reading. The Byzantine family is the largest family of manuscripts. There are more existing manuscripts that reflect the Byzantine reading than any other family. There have been arguments that the best method for determining what the original text said is to take the majority reading among manuscripts when there are variants. In other words, let the manuscripts “vote” on which

reading should be considered. The result of this method will, naturally, be a very distinctly Byzantine reading. The reading that results from this process is what is called the Majority Text (MT). While the TR does generally reflect the MT, there is still a problem with this attempt. The TR and its translators were not following this principle at all! As was already pointed out, the editions of the TR were based on only a **few** late manuscripts not a comparison of all existing manuscripts to get a majority reading. Not only that, it includes readings in several passages that are not Byzantine or MT at all and in fact are Western readings or Latin traditions (among such readings are Acts 8:37, 1 John 5:7). Readings unique to the Western-type manuscript are generally the rarest of all readings! To use those readings would go perfectly against the principle of using the MT. It seems the compilers of the TR were not using MT method and what they compiled does not completely reflect a true majority text.

Problems with the Majority Text Method

There is also a problem with the MT method itself. Byzantine manuscripts tend to define the MT because they are so much more numerous. Byzantine manuscripts tend to be dated later than Alexandrian or Western-type manuscripts. The earliest known Byzantine manuscript is a 5th century manuscript. It is not till the 9th century that we start to see more Byzantine manuscripts than the others. The vast majority of existing manuscripts dated prior to the 9th century found are Alexandrian manuscripts. In other words, as best we can tell from the existing manuscripts, it is not until about 700 years after the completion of scripture that the Byzantine-type manuscripts become the dominant type. Consider this illustration: Suppose you are in a college class and there is a virus going around so half the class, including you, miss a lecture and do not have the notes. Students begin to copy by hand notes from students who were in class. Then, hand-copies of hand-copies are made and hand-copies of those hand-copies are made and so on. Somewhere down the chain of hand-copies someone gets the clever idea to take a hand-copy to the copy machine and run off a bunch of machine-copies. Finally, everyone gets a copy made except you. Certainly any given, random copy you find will have mistakes and you are a very studious and want to know exactly what the teacher said. So you collect a large sample of notes from various people and compare them and their variant readings and try to figure out what the original is. Can you safely trust the “majority text”? Would you give every copy (machine or hand) an equal vote and just tally it up? Just because there are more machine-copies does not necessarily make the reading in the machine copies better. It could be a machine-copy of a 4th or 5th generation hand-copy and be laden with mistakes. A 2nd generation hand-copy might prove to be better. My point here is simply that a Majority Text reading is not necessarily the best method for determining the original. The historical circumstances have a significant bearing on the outcome of the copies that remain.

There is no telling for sure the historical events that caused the Byzantine-type text to be copied so often in the Northeastern part of the Mediterranean and the Western and Alexandrian-type to be diminished. However, it is likely that Muslims invading Northern Africa, Egypt and Palestine in the 7th century caused a decline in Alexandrian-type manuscripts. Also, Latin became the common language in the Western part of the Mediterranean region (especially Italy) leading to a decline in the Western-type Greek manuscripts. Meanwhile, in the Byzantine area in the 9th century the Greek language was being perpetuated as the only language to be used for the church and state, and the Byzantine-type reading was being commonly accepted and frequently copied by scribes who were beginning to write in a new “minuscule” or “cursive” style of Greek.

So, even if the TR was based on the MT method, this method may not be the best approach to finding the original.

Problems with Claiming Divine Ordination

Some have then come to the conclusion that God must have guided the events of history to allow the Byzantine type text to flourish to preserve the text that He wanted and make it a majority. And so, we can trust the MT. There is a problem with this argument as well, but let me first say that any claim to understand or explain how God's providence works or claim to know how God did or will act by me or anyone else (except as it is revealed in his word) is utter foolishness. If it is the case that God protected and multiplied the Byzantine-type reading then it appears God's providence is limited to time, language and place. Based on the existing manuscripts, the Byzantine reading was not the majority reading until the 9th century. Before this, the Alexandrian reading was most prominent. Today the Alexandrian reading (translated into English and other languages) is most prominent. Most of our Bibles today are based on Greek texts compiled mostly from Alexandrian-type manuscripts. The Latin Vulgate (a translation of the Bible into Latin) was produced from Alexandrian and Western-type manuscripts and that was even more prolific than the Byzantine-type Greek manuscripts in the Latin speaking world all throughout the time the Byzantine-type Greek manuscripts were flourishing in Byzantium. The point here is that if you isolate only ancient Greek manuscripts the Byzantine-type from a majority, but if God's providence is supposed to always keep that reading as a majority then it only succeeded in the Greek language, in a limited amount of time, in a limited place. On top of all this it should, again, be noted that even if God had preserved the Byzantine reading as the majority, the TR, and thus the KJV, does not completely reflect the MT as it seems to pull from some Western readings and Latin traditions.

Conclusion

And so, neither the use of the Textus Receptus, the supposed use of the Majority Text or supposed divine ordination qualify the KJV above any other translation. In fact, we can even say (since older and better manuscripts have been found and put to use since the TR) many of the other translations possess some better qualities than the KJV. However, one final thought should be considered. Regardless of the method for translation or the source of manuscripts used to translate, the Bible has been well preserved. Many Christians for years have used a KJV and lived and served God in unity of teaching and doctrine with those who use the ASV, NASB or ESV. If you put all these translations side-by-side you will not see many significant differences. The places that have significant differences, like in John 7:53-8:11, Acts 8:37 and 1 John 5:7 are not, in this writer's opinion, "matters of salvation" or anything that would significantly affect our ability to discern God's will. However, it is important to understand where your translation comes from and to use a translation that will give you most accurately what God has written for us so that we can most easily discern His will and bring glory to Him.