

The KJV and Modern Translations: Manuscripts, Methods, and Meaning

Explain the differences between the KJV and modern Bible translations. Also describe the manuscript traditions used as the basis for these translations.

The differences between the KJV and many modern Bible translations mainly come from two things:

1. Different manuscript sources
2. Different translation philosophies

1. Different Manuscript Sources

The Bible was originally written in:

- **Hebrew** (most of the Old Testament)
- **Aramaic** (small portions of the Old Testament)
- **Greek** (the New Testament)

We do not possess the original handwritten copies written by Moses, David, Isaiah, Paul, John, or the other biblical authors. Those original documents, called **autographs**, were copied by hand and passed down through many generations.

What we possess today are thousands of manuscript copies, ranging from small fragments to nearly complete Bibles.

As more manuscripts were discovered over time, scholars gained access to copies that were much older (closer to the originals) than those available to the King James translators in 1611.

The Manuscripts Behind the KJV

The New Testament of the King James Version was translated primarily from the **Textus Receptus** (“Received Text”), a Greek text compiled in the early 1500s.

Scholars such as Erasmus worked with the manuscripts available to them at the time. Most of these manuscripts belonged to what is now called the **Byzantine manuscript tradition** and generally dated from the Middle Ages.

The KJV translators used the best resources available in their day and produced one of the most influential translations in history.

Discoveries After 1611

After the King James Version was published, many additional manuscripts were discovered.

These included:

- Much older Greek manuscripts
- Early papyrus fragments dating closer to the time of the apostles
- Codex Vaticanus
- Codex Sinaiticus
- The Dead Sea Scrolls (for the Old Testament)
- Ancient translations into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and other languages
- Thousands of quotations from early Christian writers

These discoveries provided scholars with a much larger body of evidence than was available in 1611.

Modern Critical Texts

Most modern translations use a Greek New Testament based on a broader collection of manuscript evidence. This is often called the **Critical Text** because scholars compare and evaluate readings from many manuscript families and sources.

Rather than relying primarily on a smaller group of later manuscripts, modern critical editions consider evidence from manuscripts spanning many centuries and geographical regions.

An Important Perspective

The issue is not that the King James translators used bad manuscripts and modern translators use good ones. The King James translators faithfully used the best manuscripts available to them.

The difference is that modern scholars have access to thousands of additional manuscripts, including many that were unknown in 1611.

As a result, some differences between the KJV and modern translations arise because translators are working from somewhat different manuscript traditions.

Understanding this historical reality helps explain why certain verses, phrases, or readings may appear differently in various Bible translations today.

Modern Translations and the Critical Text

Modern translations such as the **ESV, NIV, NASB, and CSB** still largely use the same Hebrew manuscript tradition for the Old Testament, especially the **Masoretic Text**.

However, for the New Testament, most modern translations use what is commonly called the **Critical Text**.

The Critical Text is based on thousands of manuscripts and sources that have been discovered and studied over the past several centuries. These include:

- Papyrus fragments
- Uncial manuscripts, written in large capital Greek letters
- Ancient translations into other languages
- Quotations from early church writers

Some of these manuscripts are much older than the manuscripts available to the King James translators in 1611.

For example:

Manuscript	Approximate Date
John Rylands Fragment (P52)	around AD 125
Bodmer Papyri	AD 150–250
Codex Vaticanus	around AD 325
Codex Sinaiticus	around AD 330–360

This means some modern manuscript evidence comes from copies made only about **25 to 300 years after the original New Testament writings**.

By comparison, many of the Greek manuscripts behind the Textus Receptus, used for the KJV New Testament, were from the medieval period.

So, in some cases, modern manuscript discoveries are roughly **700 to 1,000 years closer** to the original writings than many of the manuscripts primarily available in 1611.

This does not mean the KJV was translated from bad manuscripts. The KJV translators used the best resources available to them. It simply means modern translators have access to a much larger and older collection of manuscript evidence.

2. Why manuscript differences exist

Because the New Testament was copied by hand for many centuries, small variations developed among manuscripts.

Examples include:

- spelling differences
- word order changes
- omitted phrases
- repeated lines
- explanatory additions by copyists

Most differences are minor and do not affect core doctrine. However, some passages are longer or shorter depending on which manuscript family is followed.

Note:

To learn more, read, ***how were the original manuscripts written and copied***, another part in this series.

Examples of Passages with Differences

One of the most noticeable differences between the King James Version and many modern translations involves a small number of verses or passages that are treated differently because of manuscript evidence.

Some passages found in the KJV are absent from certain earlier manuscripts that were discovered after 1611. As a result, modern translators often include these passages with explanatory notes.

Common examples include:

- Mark 16:9-20 (the longer ending of Mark)
- John 7:53-8:11 (the woman taken in adultery)
- Acts 8:37
- Part of 1 John 5:7-8 (often called the Comma Johanneum)

Modern translations typically do one of the following:

- Place the passage in a footnote
- Enclose it in brackets
- Include an explanatory note about the manuscript evidence
- Occasionally place it in the text with a note explaining the issue

For example, many modern Bibles include a note such as: “Some of the earliest manuscripts do not contain these verses.”

It is important to understand that modern translators are not necessarily claiming these passages are false. Rather, they are informing readers that the manuscript evidence is divided and allowing them to see the facts for themselves.

Likewise, the KJV translators included these passages because they appeared in the Greek manuscripts available to them through the Textus Receptus.

An Important Perspective

These passages often receive a great deal of attention, but they represent only a very small portion of the New Testament.

Furthermore, no major Christian doctrine depends entirely upon any one of these disputed passages. The deity of Christ, the Trinity, salvation by grace through faith, the resurrection, and other essential Christian teachings are clearly taught throughout Scripture in many other places.

The debate over these passages is not usually about doctrine. It is primarily about determining which readings most likely appeared in the original manuscripts.

3. Translation Philosophy Differences

Another reason Bible translations differ is because translators use different approaches when bringing Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into English.

Formal Equivalence

Formal equivalence is sometimes called “**word-for-word**” translation.

Examples include:

- KJV
- NKJV
- NASB
- ESV

These translations try to stay close to the wording, grammar, and structure of the original languages. This can make them very helpful for careful Bible study, though the wording may sometimes feel less natural in modern English.

Dynamic Equivalence

Dynamic equivalence is sometimes called “**thought-for-thought**” translation.

Examples include:

- NIV
- NLT

These translations focus more on expressing the meaning of the original text in clear, natural modern English. This can make them easier to read, though they may not always follow the exact wording or sentence structure as closely.

Important Perspective

Both approaches involve interpretation. No translation is purely word-for-word, because languages do not match perfectly. Translators must often decide how to best communicate the meaning of the original text in English.

A formal translation may be better for close study, while a dynamic translation may be easier for reading and understanding larger sections.

4. Language Changes Over Time

Another reason modern Bible translations differ from the King James Version is that the English language has changed significantly since 1611.

Many words used in the KJV are still familiar today, but some no longer mean what they meant when the translators originally used them. As a result, modern readers can sometimes misunderstand a passage simply because the meaning of a word has shifted over time.

For example:

- **“Conversation”** once meant **conduct** or **way of life** (Philippians 1:27).
- **“Prevent”** once meant **precede** or **go before** (1 Thessalonians 4:15).
- **“Let”** once meant **hinder** or **restrain** (2 Thessalonians 2:7).
- **“Suffer”** often meant **allow** or **permit** (Matthew 19:14).
- **“Quit you like men”** meant **act courageously** (1 Corinthians 16:13).

These words were perfectly understandable in 1611, but many readers today assign them modern meanings and may misunderstand the passage.

For this reason, modern translations often update older English expressions so that contemporary readers can more easily understand the intended meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek texts.

For example, where the KJV says:

“Let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ.”
(Philippians 1:27)

A modern translation might say:

“Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

The meaning is essentially the same, but the modern wording communicates the idea more clearly to today’s readers.

An Important Perspective

The goal of these updates is usually not to change doctrine, but to communicate the original meaning in language that modern readers naturally understand.

Every translation faces the challenge of bridging the gap between ancient languages and modern readers. The KJV accomplished that task for English speakers in 1611. Modern translations attempt to do the same for readers today.

5. The NKJV Is Somewhat Unique

The New King James Version, or NKJV, is somewhat unique among modern Bible translations.

Unlike many modern translations, the NKJV keeps the same basic New Testament manuscript tradition used by the King James Version, the **Textus Receptus**.

However, the NKJV updates the English language so modern readers can understand it more easily. Older words, sentence structures, and expressions are revised while still trying to preserve the style and dignity of the KJV.

Another helpful feature of the NKJV is its footnotes. These notes often compare readings from:

- The **Textus Receptus**.
- The **Majority Text**.
- The **Critical Text**.

This allows readers to see where different manuscript traditions vary.

In that sense, the NKJV serves as a bridge. It keeps the traditional manuscript base of the KJV while providing updated English and giving readers notes about other major manuscript traditions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the differences between English Bible translations do create a level of confusion, especially in a group setting where everyone is using a different version. When one person's Bible uses different words or phrases than another's, it can be difficult for a teacher to explain a particular passage. Likewise, when Scripture is read aloud, others may struggle to follow along because their translation reads differently.

For that reason, there is great value in a group, church, or Bible study using a common translation. When everyone is reading from the same Bible, it becomes easier to follow the lesson, compare passages, memorize Scripture together, and discuss the text without unnecessary confusion.

Personally, this is one of the reasons I have continued to use the King James Version. It has been the Bible I have read, studied, memorized, preached, and taught from for many years. While I understand the strengths and usefulness of other translations, I appreciate the consistency that comes from having a common Bible that everyone can follow together.

My purpose in this study has not been to attack the King James Version or to elevate modern translations above it. Rather, it has been to understand the true history of the Bible, the manuscript evidence behind our translations, and the process God has used to preserve His Word through the centuries.

At the end of the day, our confidence is not in a particular group of translators, printers, or editors. Our confidence is in God, who has faithfully preserved His Word and continues to use it to save souls, strengthen believers, and point people to Jesus Christ.

In addition to the confusion caused by many different Bible translations being used in the same setting, I also want to address a spirit that has divided Christians for generations.

The spirit I am referring to is not from God. It is an angry, prideful, divisive, and disruptive spirit. It shows up when people care more about proving they are right than what is right.

I believe every Christian will give account to God for how they treated other believers. Those who use the King James Version as a club to beat down, shame, or condemn other sincere Christians are not walking in the spirit of Christ.

We can hold strong convictions without being harsh. We can love the KJV without attacking others. We can stand for truth without surrendering to pride.

God is not pleased when His Word is used as a weapon against His children. The Bible should lead us to humility, love, truth, and obedience, not arrogance, strife, and division.