

Critical Issues Commentary

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King James Only?

by Bob DeWaay

“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4)

In recent years, an old debate has rekindled: Is the King James Bible the only valid translation of the Scriptures for English speaking people? G. A. Riplinger has published a book that claims not only that the King James is the best translation, but that all other modern versions, including the New King James, are the products of a New Age conspiracy.¹ Filled with over 600 pages of charts, quotations, footnotes, and numerous examples of similarities between New Age teachings and words found in various translations of the Bible, her book has convinced some people that she is right.

Riplinger is not the first to propose that new translations are suspect and that the King James is the only valid English Bible. In the 1950's controversy attended the publication of the Revised Standard Version, partly because it was published by the National Council of Churches and partly due to the translation of Isaiah 7:14 as “young women” rather than “virgin.” The RSV was deemed liberal and unacceptable to most conservative, Bible believing Christians. Since the King James was the only major alternative at the time, it remained the Bible for most evangelicals. Since the RSV did translate “virgin” correctly in the New Testament passages that teach the virgin birth, perhaps the translators were not trying to deny the virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14 (the Hebrew word translated in Isaiah 7:14 as “virgin” in the NASB is not translated that way in any other O.T. passage). Nevertheless,

the RSV became suspect and was never adopted by many conservatives.

With the appearance of the New American Standard Version, the New International Version and other English translations, English speaking Christians now have several options. Riplinger and others, however, have charged that every new translation, including all recent lexicons, Bible dictionaries and other study aids are the result of a grand, New Age conspiracy to change the Bible and deny the deity of Christ. According to this conspiracy theory, the Greek texts that we use are also corrupted. Some of scholars, texts, and lexicons indicted by Riplinger are: *Brown - Driver-Briggs, Alford, Thayer, A. T. Robertson, Nestles-Aland Greek New Testament, Strong's Concordance, and Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.*²

Riplinger would leave us with the King James Bible and virtually no study aids. Is this God's plan? Are all of these a grand scheme of Satan?: manuscript discoveries including the Dead Sea Scrolls, the research that has given us a rich understanding of the Hebraic background the of the New Testament, the discovery of ancient manuscripts which have verified that authenticity of the Bible before liberal critics, and the revision of the King James Bible itself into versions of English that are meaningful to current readers. As implausible as it is, Gayle Riplinger has convinced many Christians to abandon everything but their King James Bible. We shall examine her book and the theory behind it.

Getting God's Word to the People

To understand the problems with Riplinger's theory, we should first understand the history that led to modern, English translations of the Bible. The King James Bible itself was the result of a desire to get the Word

of God into the common person's hands. Translating the Bible into common languages of the people in turn was a positive result of the Reformation. Luther translated the Bible into German. Wycliff, an early pioneer, translated the Bible into English. The 1611 King James itself was a revision of earlier Bibles that can be traced back to Tyndale.³ The concept of revising previous translations, using multiple scholar's to check one another's work, and accessing multiple documentary sources was applied to the King James Bible. The King James translators used whatever sources they had at their disposal: “Consequently they had consulted the translators and commentators in all languages — Chaldee, Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, and German.”⁴

The motivation to use such scholarship came directly from the Reformation. Using the best resources to make accurate translations into current languages countered the Roman Catholic insistence that the Latin Vulgate was the only authoritative translation of the Bible. This notion had effectively kept the Scriptures and the truth from the common person. This in turn had the sorry result of making the people vulnerable to being misled and taken advantage of by the clergy. It is no wonder that many were martyred for their “audacity” of seeking to put the Bible in the hands of the people.

Reaction Against Bible Translations

The strangest irony is that the very arguments used against modern versions today were used against the 1611 King James Version. For example, T. Harwood Pattison wrote, “The witch mania, which soon after this time sent its disastrous consequences even into New England, was already in the air, and the translators were accused of giving in to the superstitions of the king in their use of such words as ‘familiar spirit,’ ‘witch,’ and ‘wizard.’”⁵ Another irony is that King James himself was an opponent of the Puritans,

but it was they who urged that a new English translation be undertaken.⁶ James wanted power and the “high church” with bishops and ecclesiastical privilege suited his purposes. For some reason he thought a new version under his auspices would enhance his situation. “He favored one uniform translation. Let the universities prepare it, the church dignitaries revise it, the Privy Council approve it, and then he would himself give to it his royal authority, so the whole church should be bound to it and to none other.”⁷ He also refused marginal notes because, “An English lady had given him a copy of the Geneva Bible, and the notes he found full of lurking treason against the powers that be.”⁸

The good thing that resulted was that the people got a better English translation than was previously available and one that was considerably updated into current language usage. The King James used what was then “modern” English. Pattison’s book includes a cover page from Tyndale’s New Testament in its original form, and it is nearly unreadable. As a matter of fact, the King James most people read today bears little resemblance to the one published in 1611.⁹ It has undergone dozens of revisions, even in our century. Jack Lewis comments on this and asks, “Which of all these revisions is to be considered the real King James?”¹⁰ To provide a readable, scholarly translation of the Bible in the current languages of the people stands in the Reformation tradition, with the purpose of keeping the scriptures in the hands of the people, and not confined only to the ecclesiastical elite. The King James provided that service for many years. But it cannot, as all its own revisions show, continue to do so if it is considered to be what it never claimed to be, **the only English version of the Bible God wants people to read.**

The King James was subject to criticisms that are amazingly similar to those now used against current translations. According to the *Cambridge History of the Bible*: “For eighty years after its publication in 1611, the King

James version endured bitter attacks. It was denounced as theologically unsound and ecclesiastically biased, as truckling to the king and unduly deferring to his belief in witchcraft, as untrue to the Hebrew text and relying too much on the Septuagint. The personal integrity of the translators was impugned. Among other things, they were accused of ‘blasphemy’, ‘most damnable corruptions’, ‘intolerable deceit’, and ‘vile imposture.’”¹¹

Those who resent that the new translations rely on manuscript discoveries of the last one hundred years would have to like-wise criticize the King James. They were working with texts that only recently had been made available. Much of the early work on the Greek text had been done by Erasmus in the 16th century. He had been roundly criticized because he dared depart from the sacrosanct Latin Vulgate. “[B]ecause Erasmus had dared to provide his own Latin translation; conservative scholars like Lee, archbishop of York, argued, as men of the ‘old learning’, that if Erasmus’ Greek codices did not contain what was in the Vulgate then they should have done [so] and must be rejected as erroneous.”¹²

Pushing the argument back a generation, it was assumed that anything that departed from the Latin Vulgate (the Roman Catholic “authorized version”) was manifestly in error. The King James translators were better versed in Latin than in Greek, since for a thousand years Latin was the language of scholarship. Yet they realized the need to consult the earlier Greek texts. The *textus receptus*, the Greek text most used by the King James translators, was basically dependent on Beza’s work.¹³ Consonant with history, Beza was criticized and accused: “[Y]et Beza has been attacked from the early seventeenth century onward for modifying the text to suit his own theological presuppositions.”¹⁴ This criticism was mostly unfounded,¹⁵ but unfounded criticism seems always to accompany efforts to provide better access to the authentic text of the Bible.

We can trace this process of reaction and accusation back even farther. Though the Roman Catholic Church historically has acknowledged the Latin Vulgate, Augustine was concerned about a departure from the Septuagint which he considered authoritative. He wrote, “[M]y only reason for objecting to the public reading of your translation from the Hebrew in our churches was, lest, bringing forward anything which was, as it were, new and opposed to the authority of the Septuagint version, we should trouble by serious cause of offense the flocks of Christ, whose ears and hearts have become accustomed to listen to that version to which the seal of approbation was given by the apostles themselves.”¹⁶ Since the apostles often quoted the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament prepared in Alexandria by 70 scholars) it was supposed by many to be the approved text for Christians.

A couple of centuries before that, (in about AD 155) Justin Martyr engaged in a debate with the Jewish Trypho in which Justin accused the Jews of using defective Scriptures: “But I am far from putting reliance in your teachers, who refuse to admit that the interpretation made by the seventy elders who were with Ptolemy [king] of the Egyptians is a correct one; and they attempt to frame another.”¹⁷ Some in the ancient world thought that the translation of the Septuagint was a direct inspiration from God. It was indeed the Old Testament most used in the early centuries and was held in high esteem by Jews and Christians. It was quoted in the New Testament, “[M]ost of the New Testament citations of the Old Testament follow the Septuagint”¹⁸ Justin was arguing that the Septuagint was the Greek Bible of choice and that any other translation was misguided.¹⁹

The history of debate over Bible translations shows us two things: 1) people are prone to attach themselves to one translation and make it into the only inspired text when it is in fact just a translation and 2) the same traditional, irrational arguments will be put

forth to the defend that translation and to slander any attempts to put the Bible into current languages.

Taking the Bible out of the Common Person's Hands

If we refuse to allow translating the Bible into currently used languages, we effectively hinder people's ability to know the Word of God. Languages change over the centuries. Anyone who doubts this ought to try to read an actual 1611 version of the King James. It would be very difficult. If church authorities allow use of only certain translations, as pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism did with the Latin Vulgate, they can effectively limit access to the Bible. The older and more obscure a language is, the more it is the realm of only trained scholars to read and understand it.

I used the King James until 1978. The reason I switched to the New American Standard was that I found myself constantly having to translate the King James into current English after reading the text during a sermon. I had taken Greek in Bible college and often consulted the Greek when there was a question about a passage in the King James. Most of the problems were due to the fact that certain words in King James English mean something entirely different now. A famous example is "peculiar" in **1Peter 2:9** which is supposed to mean a people that are especially God's unique possession, but now peculiar means "odd" in a negative sense. Consider **Psalms 88:13** in the KJV, "*But unto thee have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee.*" How does prayer "prevent" God? This verse seems rather odd until one realizes that "prevent" in older English means "go before." Here is the passage in the New American Standard Version: "*But I, O Lord, have cried out to Thee for help, And in the morning my prayer comes before Thee.*" The New American Standard update of 1995 changes "thee" in language addressed to God, "*But I, O Lord, have cried out to You for help, And in the morning my prayer comes before You.*"

There are countless examples of

similar confusion, as well as words no longer used at all. Only those who are well versed in languages are able to quickly adapt to the changes. I learned the meanings of many obscure King James words when I used to look them up in the Greek Bible before preaching on a text. But what about the people who cannot do that? What about people who are intimidated by King James only preachers or books like Riplinger's that forbid even the use any of the twentieth century study aids? If this logic is followed, when a person does not understand a word or passage in the KJV, he or she has no recourse but to rely on the preacher to give an accurate interpretation. Other translations are not to be consulted and concordances or lexicons are considered tools of Satan, to be avoided at all costs. How then are the people of God going to be "Bereans" and search the scriptures to see if what they are being told is true?

I am not criticizing people who love the King James, or preach from the King James. They can do like I did and explain the meaning of difficult words to the people. I am challenging those who falsely accuse all other translations of being sinister New Age plots and who refuse any use of lexicons or Greek dictionaries to find out the meaning of words. Their arguments are invalid and their practice dangerous. They threaten the spiritual well-being of the Lord's flock. Those who have labored hard to provide accurate, understandable Biblical translations do not.

Twisted Quotations

New Age Bible Versions by G. A. Riplinger could serve as a handbook for misuse of quotations and faulty logic. It contains misused ellipses (those . . .). She uses omissions to make authors say the opposite of what they meant. For example, in her attempt to slander an early Greek manuscript, she notes that it was found with a copy of the *Epistle of Barnabas*. She then quotes *Barnabas*, "Satan . . . is Lord" (Ch. 18).²⁰ Here is the what the *Epistle of Barnabas* actually says: "There are two ways of doctrine and

authority, the one of light, and the other of darkness. But there is a great difference between these two ways. For over one are stationed the light-bringing angels of God, but over the other the angels of Satan. And He indeed (i.e., God) is Lord for ever and ever, but he (i.e. Satan) is prince of the time of iniquity."²¹ Riplinger has twisted the passage to say the opposite of what was being said by the misuse of ellipses. This is not an isolated incident.

Faulty Logic

The faulty logic she employs is to assume that Greek manuscripts are not to be judged by scientific evidence and the best processes available to determine the validity and age of a manuscript, but by where they were found, with what and by whom. However, the same arguments could be used against the King James. For example, the King James translators relied heavily upon the Latin and often consulted the Latin Vulgate. The Latin Vulgate was the Bible of the apostate, Roman Catholic church. Therefore, by Riplinger's logic, the King James is suspect. I do not believe this line of reasoning, but it is at least as valid as Riplinger's.

The King James translators relied heavily on the Latin. Ironically, she uses the fact that modern translations do not use "Lucifer"²² in Isaiah 14 and "Diana" in Acts 19 to show that they are New Age and trying to confuse people about Satan's plots. Yet the main reason these words are found in the King James is that they are Latin. Going back to the Hebrew and Greek to translate to English does not lead to the use of Latin terms. She might as well criticize the new versions for not using the Roman Catholic Bible in their translations.

Guilt by Association

A favorite tactic in Riplinger's book is to string together long lists of associations and then claim that anything associated with them is a New Age plot. For example, Kittel was supportive of Hitler in Germany. Therefore, everything in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament

(TDNT) is a plot to pervert the Bible. However, TDNT needs to be judged on its own merits. As a matter of fact, far from being anti-Semitic, it provides a tremendous amount of quality material on the Jewish and Hebrew backgrounds of the New Testament. It has done much to show how the Greek New Testament is to be understood in a Jewish, Hebrew context, which was badly needed. That Kittel, the general editor (of the first four out of the ten volumes), was associated with Hitler is a sad fact, but it does not follow that the many scholars who contributed to the dictionary purposely twisted the facts in a Satanic way.

If we apply the same technique (guilt by association) to the King James, it also fails the test. Riplinger goes out of her way to portray B.F. Westcott as a horribly mid-guided spiritist. For example, she writes, "B. F. Westcott, editor of the 'New' Greek text underlying the NIV, NASB and all new version, agrees with Blavatsky that visions of 'the Virgin' are merely 'God' changing 'form'."²³ Yet, ironically, what Riplinger failed to tell us was that Westcott also endorsed the King James. This is what B.F. Westcott said about the King James, "From the middle of the seventeenth century, the King' Bible has been the acknowledged Bible of the English-speaking nations throughout the world simply because it is the best."²⁴ If Westcott was the deluded New Ager Riplinger said, and he endorsed the King James, then by her logic the King James is a New Age translation also.

Guilt by association is faulty logic, but *New Age Bible Versions* virtually depends on it. Further applying Riplinger's reasoning to the King James version yields devastating results. James I of England's name and authority are invoked to this day to identify the version and claim it as "authorized." But what about this King James? Justo Gonzalez writes, "James's personal character did little to increase his prestige. He was a homosexual, and his favorites enjoyed unmerited privileges and power in his court and in his government."²⁵ Historians

Will and Ariel Durant write that James I of England was, "[G]iven to fondling handsome young men."²⁶ For example, "In 1615 King James fell in love, in his kindly ambidextrous way, with handsome, dashing, rich George Villiers, twenty-three. He made him Earl, then Marquis, then Duke of Buckingham. . ."²⁷ James' behavior was sinful and his motives seriously questionable. He opposed the Puritans and favored whatever would give him the most power. Therefore, if we apply Riplinger's standards to the King James Bible, it too is suspect and ought to be avoided.

So what have we left — no Bible at all for English speaking people? Obviously her reasoning is in error. We have many good translations, including the King James and many blessed study aids which we should use. There is a wealth of material available for those who would like in depth study about Greek manuscripts, translations, and other issues.²⁸ There is no reason to be blown about by the winds of a disreputable conspiracy theory that has the effect of making conservative Christians appear to be foolish and unwilling to know the facts. We of all people love the truth and welcome all the evidence that can be gathered. It will only, as it always has, further confirm the inerrancy and validity of the Bible. The King James only position is a position formed by ignorance and supported by blind prejudice. It can only result in keeping God's word out of the hands of the people.

Conclusion

Do we support the notion that the Bible ought to be translated into the current languages of the people, using the best possible ancient Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, and multiple scholars to check one another's work? Yes we do. The King James translators did. So do those who have produced the NASB and NIV among others. If we are correct, then the King James only argument falls on its own sword. If its criteria were applied to the King James, the King James would fail the test set up by Riplinger and others and we would be left with no valid English

version of the Bible. Therefore, the King James only position should be rejected and Christians urged use whatever resources the Lord has provided so that they may avail themselves of "all the counsel of God" (**Acts 20:27 KJV**) in their own languages.

End Notes

1. G.A. Riplinger, *New Age Bible Versions*, (Munroe Falls, Ohio: 1993, A. V. Publications).
2. *Ibid.* 599 - 601.
3. See *The Cambridge History of the Bible, The West from The Reformation to the Present Day*, Vol. 3, ed. S. L. Greenslade: 1963, Cambridge University Press) 147-158.
4. T. Harwood Pattison, *The History of the English Bible*, (Philadelphia: 1894, The American Baptist Publication Society) 105.
5. *Ibid.* 107
6. *Ibid.* 94, 95.
7. *Ibid.* 95
8. *Ibid.*
9. Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV*, 2nd edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 37-40.
10. *Ibid.* 40
11. *Op. Cit.* Cambridge 361.
12. *Ibid.* 60.
13. *Ibid.* 64.
14. *Ibid.* 63.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Augustine, *Letter 82 to Jerome*, *Chapt. 5.35.*
17. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chap. 71.
18. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 347.
19. A proselyte to Judaism named Aquila made a translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek and it was possibly his translation to which Justin referred, *Ibid.* 348.
20. *Op. Cit.* Riplinger, 580.
21. The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol 1., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 edition) 148. *The Epistle of Barnabus*, chapt. 18.
22. *Op. Cit.* Riplinger, 41ff.
23. *Ibid.* 105 .We have conducted an extensive study of Riplinger's book, checking her references, and have found many errors, statements taken out of context, and misquotes. A summary of our research is available upon request. It is

advisable to check her references for yourself before trusting her conclusions.

24. As quoted in Op. Cit. *Cambridge History of the Bible* 362.

25. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* Vol. 2, (New York: Harper-Collins, 1985) 152.

26. Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization 7, The Age of Reason Begins* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961) 136.

27. Ibid. 156.

28. See enclosed Bibliography.

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