

Has the KJV been translated into hundreds or thousands of languages?

By missionary Calvin George

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I personally only use the KJV in English, but there are those who insist on translating directly to foreign languages from it, instead of from the original languages. They will often state in certain words that there is a precedent for doing so. There are all sorts of wild claims as to the King James Version having been translated directly into hundreds of foreign languages, which implies totally bypassing the Greek and Hebrew. Only one of the claims I have encountered so far provide the source from which the number of translations was taken. Let us examine those claims:

In his book *Final Authority*, author William (Bill) Grady claims that the KJV was translated into 300 languages.¹ No source was given for this information.

According to an online article by Richard Clark, the KJV was translated into foreign languages 800 times.² No source was given for this information. When I requested the source from the author via e-mail, he replied that he could not recall from where the information came.

In his book *Things that are Different are not the Same*, Mickey Carter claims: "Many foreign nations have the Bible in their own language, and many of these are translations made directly from the King James Version. Missionaries have translated the King James Version more than any other version. It has been the standard to translate the King James Version into other languages."³ No source was given for this information.

According to an internet article by Timothy S. Morton, the KJV has been translated directly into a foreign language 1,000 times, but then in the same article he says it took place in whole or in part with 1,578 languages.⁴ No source was given for this information. When I requested the source from the author via e-mail, he replied that he could not recall from where the information came.

In *Which Bible?* edited by David Otis Fuller, in a chapter by the 7th Day Adventist Benjamin Wilkinson, it is mentioned that one unnamed writer claimed the KJV had been translated into 886 languages.⁵

¹ Grady, William. *Final Authority*. Schererville, Indiana: Grady Publications, 1993, p. 174

² <http://members.aol.com/AVBibleTAB/av/gbook.htm> Accessed February 14, 2006

³ Carter, Mickey. *Things that are Different are not the Same*. Haines City, FL. Landmark Baptist Press, 1993, p. 84

⁴ <http://members.citynet.net/morton/kjv4.htm> Accessed February 14, 2006

⁵ Fuller, David Otis. *Which Bible?* Grand Rapids International Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 5th Edition, 1987, p. 317

In his book *Seventy-Five Problems*, author Lloyd Streeter states that the KJV has been translated into other languages between 600 and 700 times.⁶ He also did not provide a source for his information.

In her book *In Awe of Thy Word*, Gail Riplinger writes: “Because the KJV is a precise and contextual accurate translation, thousands of foreign language translations were subsequently made directly from it.”⁷ No source was given for this information. She then documented only one case in which Adoniram Judson’s translation was rejected by the American Bible Society (ABS), but she left out the key elements of the context. Riplinger portrayed Judson’s translation as being rejected “because it rested solely on his translation from a Greek printed edition, without reference to the KJV.” But in reality, Judson’s translation was rejected for only one simple reason: He had translated the Greek word *baptizo* with the deeper meaning of “immerse,” instead of the transliteration “baptize,” as found in the common English Bible and virtually all foreign translations. The ABS considered Judson’s translation a “sectarian version,” apparently because it could not be used by those who believed in sprinkling. This choice, and his refusal to change it, caused the American Bible Society not only to refuse publication of his life’s work, but also to pass a resolution against any such “sectarian” version of the Scriptures. It maintained that it would not publish or distribute any Bibles that did not “conform in the principle of their translation, to the common English version.”⁸ Judging by the context, it is clear that the American Bible Society viewed the common English Bible as “non-sectarian,” and they were requiring foreign translations to follow the example of the common English Bible and be “non-sectarian.” There was no order to translate directly from the English Bible. This was issued in response to the *baptizo* controversy, because the ABS wanted to be ecumenical and not allow translations that translated the previously mentioned Greek word as “immerse.” They were not concerned about making the KJV the final authority for foreign languages in all matters, and that is reflected in the following quotes:

The intention of this resolution was to prevent the translation of a Greek verb and its cognates in order that the New Testament might teach nothing positive with respect to the external act in baptism.⁹

Again, it has been **charged** that the board [of the American Bible Society] have set up the English Bible as a standard, to which all translations must be conformed. The resolutions above cited, as to which the society strictly adheres, show this to be **unfounded**. Missionaries and others, in making new versions, are **required by these rules to translate from the original**

⁶ Streeter, Lloyd. *Seventy-Five Problems*. First Baptist Church of LaSalle, 2001, p. 252

⁷ Riplinger, Gail. *In Awe of Thy Word*, Av Publications, 2003, pp. 991-992

⁸ Gutjher, Paul. *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States 1777-1880* Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 106

⁹ Middleditch, Robert Thomas. *Burmah's great missionary: records of the life, character, and achievements of Adoniram Judson*. 1854, p. 322

tongues, and their imitation of the English is not expected to extend any further than the transference of a few words which either can not be translated, or concerning the meaning of which there are disputes which divide the evangelical churches"¹⁰ [bold not in original]

Peter Ruckman was by far the most contradictory of all authors, providing eight different wildly-varying figures, even different figures in the same book! According to *The Christian's Handbook of Biblical Scholarship*, the KJV was translated directly into a foreign language either 300 times¹¹ or 700 times,¹² depending on which chapter you were reading. In another book he states that the KJV was translated 800 times,¹³ and in yet another book the number given was 901.¹⁴ Recently in his monthly publication the number given is 160.¹⁵ After I finished the first edition of this article, I found yet another wildly-differing claim in another book, which put the number at 500.¹⁶ No source was ever given for his contradictory information. Ruckman has also claimed without a source that "the AV was translated into more than one hundred times as many languages as any Greek Bible" (*Bible Believer's Bulletin*, Dec. 1980, p. 4). On page 5 of the April 2006 issue of the previously-mentioned periodical published by Ruckman, he states that the KJV is available in 60 different languages with only parts of it available in 160 different languages. Finally, Ruckman's book *What Saith the Scripture*, p. 37 gives a figure of 600 before the year 1880. The fact that Ruckman has eight different widely-varying numbers with no sources prove that his information is not scholarly, and should not be taken seriously.

Brian Donovan, associate to Peter Ruckman, wrote the following simplistic opinion in Ruckman's periodical *The Bible Believer's Bulletin*:

Any effort to translate the Bible into other languages will be right if it comes from the KJV, and wrong when it does not. It is that simple.¹⁷

The only claim that included documentation was the following statement in material compiled by Pastor Phil Stringer entitled *The Word Of God For All Nations*:

¹⁰ Strickland, William Peter. *History of the American Bible Society: From Its Organization to the Present Time*. 1850, Harper & Row, pp. 154-155 (bold not in original)

¹¹ Ruckman, Peter. *The Christian's Handbook of Biblical Scholarship*, Pensacola: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1988, p. 18

¹² Ruckman, Peter. *The Christian's Handbook of Biblical Scholarship*, Pensacola: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1988, p. 170

¹³ Ruckman, Peter. *The History of the New Testament Church*, Pensacola: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1984, Vol. 1, pg. 390

¹⁴ Ruckman, Peter. *The Christian Liar's Library*, Pensacola: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1997, p. 186

¹⁵ Ruckman, Peter. "Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge" *Bible Believer's Bulletin*, Vol. 30, #1, January 2006, p. 9

¹⁶ Ruckman, Peter. *Manuscript Evidence*, 1997, p. 189

¹⁷ Donovan, Brian. *Bible Believer's Bulletin*. April 1994, p. 20

The King James Bible is widely available. It has been the base text for translations in many languages. According to Winston Churchill it has been translated into 760 languages. (Churchill's History of the English-Speaking Peoples, one volume edition, p. 160).¹⁸

In *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples, Vol. 2 The New World*, 1959, Dood, Mead & Company, 1959, pp. 153-154, Churchill writes as follows:

If the adventurers took books with them they took the Bible, Shakespeare, and later *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Bible they mostly took was the Authorised Version of King James I. About ninety million complete copies are thought to have been published in the English language alone. It has been translated into more than seven hundred sixty tongues. The Authorised Version is still the most popular in England and the United States.

The question is—was the reference to 760 languages referring to the Bible in general being translated into 760 languages, or specifically the KJV being translated into that many languages? It seems it can be interpreted either way. The sentence previous to the mention of 760 languages seems to be referring to the Bible in general, otherwise if it was referring to the KJV it would not have been necessary to state how many times it was published “in English.” The sentence previous to that speaks of the Bible in general among other books, and only mentions the KJV in passing. If one leans towards believing that the reference to 760 languages is the number of times the KJV had been translated into other languages, there are several matters to consider: Does Churchill's figure even fit within Bible translation statistics in the 1950's? Should Churchill's figure be taken seriously considering he did not provide a source for his information? Also, was Winston Churchill considered an authority in the area of the history of Bible translations?

An example of an authority on the history of Bible translation would be *The Bible of Every Land: A History of the Sacred Scriptures in Every Language and Dialect Into Which Translations Have Been Made* published by Samuel Bagster in editions between 1848-1860. In it several translators are mentioned as having consulted the KJV (often alongside other translations), but in my perusal of the book I could only find about 3-4 translation projects in which the KJV was the only one listed as the translation source (and not for mere consultation). It should be pointed out that consulting the KJV in the process of translating does not count as translating from the KJV. For example, the Spanish Bible was consulted in the process of translating the KJV 1611 (according to the preface). Would it therefore be proper to say that the KJV was translated from Spanish? Certainly not. Another example of an authority on the history of Bible translation would be T.H. Darlow and H.F. Moule, who wrote the massive multi-volume *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture in the Library of the British*

¹⁸ <http://wcbible.org/documents/thewordofgod.pdf> Accessed April 11, 2009

and Foreign Bible Society between 1903-1911. I have browsed through it, and the times I've looked for the source of a given Bible, it did not mention the KJV. Another source which is quite authoritative is the American Bible Society, which since its inception has been involved in Bible translation projects. In 1951, they announced in the May issue of the *Bible Society Record* that whole Bibles had been translated in 191 languages, with whole New Testaments having been translated into 246 languages. The figure for languages in which at least a Gospel or other whole book had been published was put at 597. The only way in which Churchill's number of 760 can even fit was in the figure in which at least a portion (including less than one whole book) of the Bible had been translated, which came to a total of 1,034 languages. It should be noted that the figures provided by the American Bible Society was for Bibles in all languages translated from any source, not Bibles translated from the KJV exclusively.

Conclusion

One situation in which a translation directly from English might be justified, is in cases where a missionary with no knowledge of original languages desperately needs to translate the Bible into a dialect neglected by translators familiar with the original languages. Organizations such as New Tribes Mission and Wycliffe Bible Translators may be involved in such matters, but they do not have a reputation for using the KJV exclusively, so any statistics they could provide should not be automatically considered to be foreign translations directly from the KJV.

At the time of this writing, I am only aware of 4-5 translations that I know for sure were translated directly from the King James Version. This includes a Spanish New Testament translated directly from the King James Version, but it is no longer in print and was overwhelmingly rejected by Spanish speakers. Although it is possible that more than 4-5 Bibles were translated directly from the KJV, no other specific documented examples could be located at the time of this writing. The fact that only one of the above authors provides a source for the supposed hundreds or thousands of times the KJV has been translated into other languages is cause for suspicion.

The KJV is a good example of what a foreign translation should be like, but it should not be considered superior to Greek and Hebrew, as Peter Ruckman began to teach in the 1960's.

May God help us approach this most important matter in a way that honors Christ, upholds His Word, and sets forth the truth.

Appendix

If all Foreign Bibles had to be translated from the KJV...

By Missionary Calvin George

1. Such a theory would invalidate about 99% of foreign-language Bibles in use. We would have to start all over again.
2. All Bible translators would have to know English. Greek and Hebrew should be dropped in seminaries and English taught instead.
3. Bibles for Greek and Hebrew speakers would have to be translated from English.
4. Such a theory would invalidate all English Reformation Bibles translated before 1611. This is in spite of the fact that the KJV is basically a revision of the Bishop's Bible.
5. This theory would invalidate the KJV itself, as it was not translated from the KJV. The ultimate example of a logical fallacy!
6. How convenient for English-speakers to insist that the Bible that happens to be in their own language be the final authority for all other languages!
7. The English language cannot always reproduce all the nuances of a particular Greek or Hebrew word. For example, *they* in English is neuter, but in the original language *they* may be a feminine or masculine word, and may imply other matters not revealed in English. The receptor language may be able to reproduce details not readily apparent in English.
8. Translating from the original source language is one of the very basic rules of translation. The thought of translating a translation does not even sound right. The farther one strays from the original the more likely one will stray from the meaning of the original. As in virtually all translations, the KJV translators took some liberties in the translation process. For example, the introduction to *Young's Literal Translation* mentions that the Hebrew word *panim* was translated 94 different ways (if you count idiomatic renderings)! Conversely, "to destroy" in the KJV represents 49 different Hebrew words according to *Englishman's Hebrew Concordance*! If in the subsequent translation the translator were to take some liberty on a KJV word that was a stretch to begin with, the results could be far from what the original intended.
9. Misunderstanding the nearly 400-year old vocabulary of the KJV could lead to extremely awkward translations. A real example that comes to mind is the term Holy Ghost (which is not different than Holy Spirit in

Greek) as *Fantasma Santo* in the New Testament Bernard McVey attempted from the KJV to Spanish. There is no exact equivalent for the term Holy Ghost in Spanish, so he used a term that would be as ridiculous as “Holy Spook.” He translated Romans 2:11 as “*Porque no hay respeto de personas para con Dios,*” which sounds like God does not respect anyone. The Greek word underlying “respect” is partiality or favoritism. I give the KJV translators the benefit of the doubt that the way they translated Romans 2:11 in the 17th century meant to them that God does not show favoritism toward anyone. I once heard a preacher declare in a sermon based on 1 Cor. 16:13 (quit you like men) that it means “when you quit something, quit like a man!” He did not realize that the Greek meaning referred to behaving manly in general. If he was doing a translation from the KJV to a foreign language he would have really messed that verse up. Another example that could be added is the word “nephew” in the KJV, which in Elizabethan English meant “grandson,” which is also the meaning of the underlying word in the original languages. If the translator is unaware of this, and translates the KJV word as “nephew” in the receptor language, he will produce a translation that does not accurately represent the original languages.

10. It is the author’s observation that most of the people who are insisting on having foreign translations made word-for-word from the KJV are not missionaries dealing with foreign languages. In other words, most people who insist on this are not speaking a foreign language fluently themselves and do not have to live with the decisions they want to make for others, as they cannot even read from any foreign Bible, much less witness or preach from one.