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Do We Need "Thee" and "Thou"?

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Many criticize the use of “thee, thou, thy, and thine” in the King James Bible. They say that these expressions are antiquated and difficult to understand and therefore should be dropped.

It is important to understand that the use of these expressions in common English had already dropped out by 1611 when the King James Bible was published. We can see this by reading the Translator’s Preface and other writings of the translators.

Why, then, were these retained in the English Bible in the 17th century?

They were retained for the following two reasons.

First, the King James Bible retained THEE, THOU, and THINE for linguistic purposes.

This form of English adds a spirit of grandeur to the English Bible that is lacking

when it is removed. None of the modern English Bibles has been praised as literary masterpieces as the King James Bible has.

The Greek scholar A.T. Robertson observed: “No one today speaks the English of the Authorised Version, or ever did for that matter, for though, like Shakespeare, it is the pure Anglo-Saxon, yet unlike Shakespeare IT REPRODUCES TO A REMARKABLE EXTENT THE SPIRIT AND LANGUAGE OF THE BIBLE” (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 56).

The British biblical scholar Bishop Lightfoot wrote, “Indeed, we may take courage from the fact that the language of our English Bible is not the language of the age in which the translators lived, but in its grand simplicity stands out in contrast to the ornate and often affected diction of the literature of the time” (*The Divine Original*, Trinitarian Bible Society, London, England).

Second, the King James Bible retained THEE, THOU, and THINE for biblical accuracy.

The Hebrew and Greek languages of the Old and New Testament make a distinction between you plural and you singular. The English language also has this ability. THEE, THOU, and THINE are always singular. YOU, YE, and YOUR are always plural.

The distinction between the singular and plural in English began in the late 1200s and continued commonly until the 1500s. By the late 1500s and early 1600s centuries, the Elizabethan and early Jacobean era (so named for Queen Elizabeth I and King James I), the terms had become somewhat corrupted so that THEE and THOU were being used as terms both of familiarity or contempt and not merely as a singular form of the pronoun. Thus, when the translators incorporated THEE and THOU into the Bible, they were not following Shakespeare; they were following the Bible itself.

In modern English, of course, this distinction has been dropped entirely, and the pronoun YOU can mean either you plural or you singular. It is much less precise and accurate.

Oswald T. Allis observed: “It is often asserted or assumed that the usage of the AV represents the speech of 300 years ago, and that now, three centuries later, it should be changed to accord with contemporary usage. But this is not at all a correct statement of the problem. The important fact is this. THE USAGE OF THE AV IS NOT THE ORDINARY USAGE OF THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: IT IS THE BIBLICAL USAGE BASED ON THE STYLE OF THE

HEBREW AND THE GREEK SCRIPTURES. The second part of this statement needs no proof and will be challenged by no one. It is undeniable that where the Hebrew and Greek use the singular of the pronoun the AV regularly uses the singular, and where they use the plural it uses the plural. Even in Deuteronomy where in his addresses, and apparently for rhetorical and pedagogical effect, Moses often changes suddenly, and seemingly arbitrarily, from singular to plural or from plural to singular, the AV reproduces the style of the text with fidelity. THAT IS TO SAY, THE USAGE OF THE AV IS STRICTLY BIBLICAL” (Allis, “Is a Pronominal Revision of the Authorized Version Desirable?” This article is available in the Bible Version section of the End Times Apostasy Database at the Way of Life Literature web site -- <http://wayoflife.org>).

FOLLOWING ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF HOW IMPORTANT THIS IS

Following are some examples of how important it is to retain the distinction between second person singular and plural. These examples (excepting [Isaiah 7:14](#)) are adapted from the book *Archaic or Accurate: Modern Translations of the Bible and You versus Thee in the Language of Worship*, edited by J.P. Thackway, and published by The Bible League of England:

[Exodus 4:15](#). “THOU shalt speak unto him, and put words in his mouth; and I will be with THY mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach YOU what YE shall do.” THOU and THY refer to Moses, but YOU refers to the nation.

[Exodus 29:42](#). “This shalt be a continual burnt offering throughout YOUR generations at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the LORD where I will meet YOU, to speak there unto THEE.” YOU, referring to the children of Israel, is explained in the following verse, but THEE refers to Moses, who had the holy privilege of hearing the words of God directly ([Leviticus 1:1](#)).

[2 Samuel 7:23](#). “And what one nation in the earth is like THY people, even like Israel, whom God went to redeem for a people to himself, and to make him a name, and to do for YOU great things and terrible, for THY land, before THY people, which THOU redeemedst to THEE from Egypt.” Here David is in prayer to God, thus accounting for the singular words THY and THOU, referring to God. David turns his attention to the people Israel when he uses the plural YOU. If “you” were used throughout, the reader would not understand who David was addressing.

[Isaiah 7:14](#). “Therefore the Lord himself shall give YOU a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” There is a

long-running debate by liberal and even New Evangelical scholars that [Isaiah 7:14](#) is only secondarily a Messianic prophecy and that its primary fulfillment was in Isaiah's day. For example, the note in the *NIV Study Bible* says of the word virgin: "May refer to a young woman betrothed to Isaiah (8:3), who was to become his second wife (his first wife presumably having died after Shear-jashub was born)." In fact, the prophecy is not directed to Isaiah personally but to the nation Israel as a whole, and this is clear in the KJV, because it indicates properly that "YOU" is plural, not singular. This important information is lost in the modern English versions, including the New King James.

[Matthew 26:64](#). "Jesus saith unto him, THOU hast said: nevertheless I say unto YOU, Hereafter shall YE see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." The singular THOU refers to the high priest, but the plural YOU refers to all who will see Christ in the day of His glory ([Rev. 1:7](#)).

[Luke 22:31-32](#). "The Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have YOU, that he may sift YOU as wheat: but I have prayed for THEE, that THY faith fail not: and when THOU art converted, strengthen THY brethren." Satan's desire was directed to all the apostles (YOU), but the Lord prays for each individually and for Peter specifically (THEE, THY).

[John 3:7](#). "Marvel not that I said unto THEE, YE must be born again." The message was spoken to an individual (THEE), Nicodemus, but the message encompassed all men (YE). The same thing occurs in verse 11, where we read, "I say unto THEE ... that YE receive not our witness."

[1 Corinthians 8:9-12](#). "Take heed lest ... this liberty of YOURS ... if any man see THEE which hast knowledge ... through THY knowledge ... But when YE sin." The plural YOURS and YE refer to the church members in general, but the Holy Spirit personalizes the exhortation by changing to the singular THEE and THY.

[2 Timothy 4:22](#). "The Lord Jesus Christ be with THY spirit. Grace be with YOU." The singular THY refers to Timothy, to whom the epistle was written ([2 Tim. 1:1](#)), but the plural YOU refers to others who were also included in Paul's final greetings, "Priscilla and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus" ([2 Tim. 4:19](#)).

[Titus 3:15](#). "All that are with me salute THEE. Greet them that love us in the faith. Grace be with YOU all." Here, the singular THEE refers to Titus, but the plural YOU refers to the church in Crete ([Tit. 1:5](#)), and to all who loved Paul in the faith.

Philemon 21-25. “Having confidence in THY obedience I wrote unto THEE, knowing that THOU wilt also do more than I say ... I trust that through YOUR prayers I shall be given unto YOU ... There salute THEE ... the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with YOUR spirit.” The singular THEE refers to Philemon, but as this short letter was also addressed to “Apphia ... Archippus ... and to the church in thy house” (v. 2), the plural form YOU, YOUR is used in verses 3, 22, and 25.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that these and many similar verses cannot be understood properly in English unless a distinction is made between the singular and plural verbs. The modern versions, in their zeal to be up-to-date at all cost, drop these distinctions and leave the average English reader in the dark.

I, for one, don't care two cents for an up-to-date Bible; I want an accurate one. And, if it can be a part of the package, I want one with beautiful, simple, powerful, majestic language that reflects the Hebrew and Greek. For this reason, I will stay with the King James Version. It is based on the preserved Greek and Hebrew text handed down by our believing forefathers rather than a text that is the product of the unbelieving “science falsely so called” of modern textual criticism, and it is a literal and faithful translation.

Though the terms “thou” and “thine” have been out of common usage of the English language for more than 400 years, it was only a few decades ago that people started complaining about it. Even then it was done largely at the prompting of Bible publishers greedy to make ever larger profits by introducing an ever more bewildering smorgasbord of “up-to-date” Bibles. Believers of the 1600s, 1700s, 1800s, and even most of the 1900s, loved the “quaint” old English of the King James Bible. They did not think it strange that their Bible did not sound like the morning newspaper. It is the Bible! It was written thousands of years ago! It is the Word of the eternal God! It is nothing like the morning newspaper; why, pray tell, should it sound like one? Though he is not a defender of the King James Bible, Leland Ryken is right when he says: “I believe that it is correct for an English translation to preserve an appropriate archaic flavor as a way of preserving the distance between us and the biblical world. Joseph Wood Krutch used an evocative formula in connection with the King James Bible when he spoke of ‘an appropriate flavor of a past time’” (Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, p. 182).

The King James Bible, in fact, is written on an 8th to 10th grade level. This has

been proven from computer analysis made by Dr. Donald Waite. He ran several books of the KJV through the *Right Writer* program and found that Genesis 1, Exodus 1, and Romans 8 are on the 8th grade level; Romans 1 and Jude are on the 10th grade level; and [Romans 3:1-23](#) is on the 6th grade level. While Shakespeare used a vocabulary of roughly 37,000 English words, the King James Bible used only 8,000 (John Wesley Sawyer, *The New Testament by William Tindale*, p. 10, quoting BBC TV, "The Story of English," copyright 1986).

Previous generations educated the people UP TO the Bible, and that is what we should do today. It is my conviction that we don't need a new translation today; we need to renew our study of the excellent one that we already have. "Instead of lowering the Bible to a lowest common denominator, why should we not educate people to rise to the level required to experience the Bible in its full richness and exaltation? Instead of expecting the least from Bible readers, we should expect the most from them. The greatness of the Bible requires the best, not the least. ... The most difficult of modern English translations -- the King James -- is used most by segments of our society that are relatively uneducated as defined by formal education. ... research has shown repeatedly that people are capable of rising to surprising and even amazing abilities to read and master a subject that is important to them. ... Previous generations did not find the King James Bible, with its theological heaviness, beyond their comprehension. Nor do readers and congregations who continue to use the King James translation find it incomprehensible. Neither of my parents finished grade school, and they learned to understand the King James Bible from their reading of it and the preaching they heard based on it. We do not need to assume a theologically inept readership for the Bible. Furthermore, if modern readers are less adept at theology than they can and should be, it is the task of the church to educate them, not to give them Bible translations that will permanently deprive them of the theological content that is really present in the Bible" (Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, pp. 107, 109).

There are many effective tools available to help people understand the KJV. Following are a few of these:

THE *BIBLE WORD LIST* from the Trinitarian Bible Society of London, England, is a pamphlet that defines 618 antiquated words in the King James Bible. See <http://www.trinitarianbiblesociety.org/>.

In my estimation, *STRONG'S EXHAUSTIVE CONCORDANCE* is the most important Bible study tool ever published. Not only is it exhaustive in its treatment of the words of the English Bible, but it also links the English words

to an exceptional dictionary of the Hebrew and Greek terms underlying the English. One does not have to know the Greek and Hebrew alphabets to use Strong's dictionary; he developed a masterly apparatus whereby each Greek and Hebrew word is assigned a number, and the student can thus search for Greek and Hebrew terms by numbers. The dictionary gives a concise definition of the Greek or Hebrew word as well as a list of how the word is translated at various places in the English Bible.

Another tool for studying the King James Bible is the *WAY OF LIFE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE BIBLE & CHRISTIANITY*.

My friends, do not be deceived by the myths that are being promulgated against the King James Bible.

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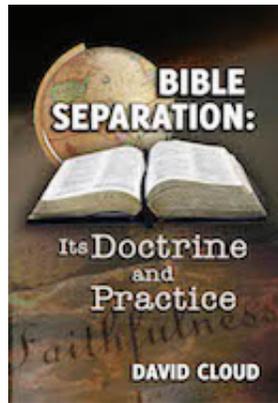
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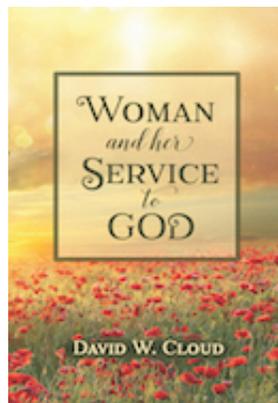
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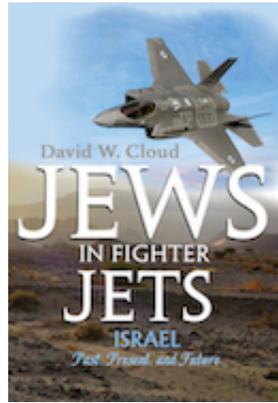
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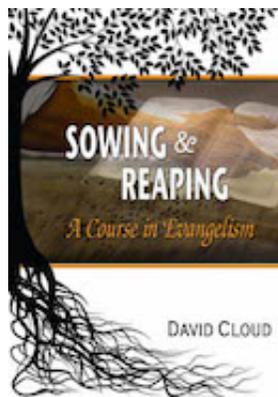
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