

The New King James Bible: A Modern Heir to a 17th-Century Classic

Question: How does the New King James Bible relate to King James 1611 and why does it have the same name?

The New King James Version (NKJV) of the Bible, first published in its entirety in 1982, stands as a direct descendant of the revered King James Version (KJV) of 1611. Its name is a deliberate nod to its predecessor, signaling a commitment to preserve the style and theological substance of the original while rendering its archaic language more accessible to contemporary readers.

The creation of the King James Version was a landmark event in the history of the English language and Christianity. Commissioned by King James I of England at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, the KJV was the product of a meticulous seven-year effort by 47 scholars. Their goal was to create a definitive English translation for the Church of England, drawing from the original Hebrew and Greek texts. The result was a masterpiece of English prose that profoundly shaped the language and became the most widely read book in the English-speaking world for centuries.

However, over the ensuing 370 years, the English language evolved significantly. Words that were common in the 17th century became obsolete, and the meanings of others shifted, creating a barrier to comprehension for modern readers. Recognizing this challenge, Thomas Nelson Publishers embarked on a project in 1975 to produce a modern revision of the classic KJV.

The scholars tasked with creating the New King James Version were guided by a principle of "complete equivalence." Their aim was not to create a new translation from scratch, but to update the vocabulary and grammar of the 1611 KJV while maintaining its literary beauty and theological integrity. This approach is the primary reason for retaining the "King James" name; it signifies that the NKJV is a direct revision and continuation of the KJV tradition, rather than a departure from it.

Key Similarities and Differences:

Feature	King James Version (1611)	New King James Version (1982)
New Testament Textual Basis	Textus Receptus ("Received Text")	Textus Receptus, with footnotes noting variations in the Majority Text and Nestle-Aland/United Bible Societies critical texts.
Old Testament Textual Basis	Masoretic Text (specifically the Ben Chayyim edition)	Masoretic Text (specifically the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia), with footnotes noting significant variants from the Septuagint and other ancient manuscripts.
Translation Philosophy	Formal Equivalence (word-for-word)	Complete Equivalence (a form of formal equivalence with a focus on updating archaic language)
Language	Early Modern English (e.g., "thee," "thou," "-eth" endings)	Modern English (e.g., "you," standard verb endings)

The decision to base the NKJV's New Testament on the Textus Receptus was a significant one. By the 20th century, most modern translations were utilizing a critical text, which is based on older and what many scholars consider more reliable manuscripts. However, the NKJV translators chose to adhere to the same textual tradition as the KJV to maintain a strong continuity between the two versions. They did, however, include extensive footnotes to acknowledge where significant textual variations exist.

In essence, the New King James Bible seeks to be a bridge between the rich literary and spiritual heritage of the 1611 King James Version and the linguistic realities of the modern era. It shares the same name because it sees itself as a faithful steward of the KJV's legacy, offering the same foundational text in a voice that is more readily understood by today's readers.

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