

Does The Authorized Version Contain Archaic Words?

By Dr. Laurence M. Vance



The Authorized Version of the Bible is the best-selling, most read, most loved, and most revered book in history. This is beyond dispute. But doesn't the Authorized Version contain archaic words? Certainly. Should we therefore replace it with something else? Certainly not. This is what is disputed. The Authorized Version of the Bible is often lauded for its place in literature, its majestic style, and its poetic rhythm, but unfortunately, these statements are always qualified by the charge that the language of the Authorized Version is archaic Elizabethan English. Since the publication of the Authorized Version in 1611, a steady stream of new and updated English Bibles have appeared. Although many accusations have been hurled at the Authorized Version down through the years in regards to the merit of its underlying Greek text, its many supposed mistranslation, and the character of its namesake, every new English translation since 1611 has charged the Authorized Version with having archaic words that render it unintelligible, difficult, or misleading. But this charge is starting to wear thin, for every six months a new English translation of the Bible appears on the market with the claim that its modern, up-to-date, contemporary language is needed to make the Bible more understandable. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the Authorized Version does contain some archaic words that need explanation.

It is our contention, however, that the Authorized Version is the Bible for English speaking Christians and the standard by which all other versions should be judged. Just as a certain vocabulary is necessary to understand science, medicine, engineering, or computers, so to learn and understand the Bible one must be familiar with its vocabulary instead of dragging it down to one's own level. And just as no one revises Shakespeare or Milton, but instead learns the vocabulary necessary to understand those particular works, so every man who desires to read and understand the Bible must first become acquainted with the vocabulary of the Authorized version rather than revise it. But even though it contains archaic words, the Authorized Version is no more archaic than daily newspapers, current magazines, and modern Bible versions. Contemporary publications often use words that are unintelligible to the average reader, yet they are either ignored, guessed at, or looked up in a dictionary - no one ever cancels their subscription or writes a letter to the editor of the respective publication to complain that it uses archaic words.

How many people canceled their subscription to The Weekly Standard because it used the word ecdysiasts? How many people got upset with PC Computing because it contained the word pachyderm? But not only do contemporary publications use difficult words, they often employ words in the Authorized Version that are supposedly archaic. In the last few years Astronomy magazine has used archaic words like wax, buffet, thither, and imagery. The Detroit News saw nothing wrong with the words betwixt and

doth. However, when it comes to the use of archaic words, modern Bible versions are the greatest culprits. The NIV, touted as one of the most easy-to-read modern versions, is the worst when it comes to archaic words.

Not only does the NIV retain supposedly archaic AV words like coney, mattock, and asunder, it regularly updates simple words in the Authorized Version to a more formidable word. Why did the NIV alter sad to “disheartened”? What was the point in updating cup to “goblet”? The NASB, NKJV, and NRSV are almost as bad.

Does the AV contain archaic words? Certainly. But perhaps a better question would be: Do contemporary publications like Time, U.S. News & World Report, the Chicago Tribune, Forbes, and the New Republic contain archaic words? They unquestionably do. Also without dispute is the striking revelation that modern, up-to-date Bible versions like the NRSV, NASB, NIV, and NKJV likewise contain archaic words.

So that fact that the AV contains archaic words is just that, a fact that should be accepted. For just as no one revises Shakespeare or Milton, but instead learns the vocabulary necessary to understand those particular works, and just as a certain vocabulary is necessary to understand science, medicine, engineering, or computers, and just as no one ever cancels their subscription or writes a letter to the editor of a contemporary publication to complain that it uses archaic words, and just as no one ever complains about archaic words surfacing in modern Bible versions, so to read and understand the Bible one must be familiar with the vocabulary of the AV instead of dragging it down to one’s own level by revising it.

Does the AV contain archaic words? Certainly. Should we therefore replace it with something else. Certainly not.

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Archaic Words and the Authorized Version, book by Laurence M. Vance - for purchase at CBD.com