

The King James New Testament: How a Translation Determined Christian Thought on Marriage and Celibacy for Nearly Four Hundred Years

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Abstract

Traditional translations of 1 Corinthians 7.1 suggest to the reader that the words “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (KJV) are Paul’s words of advice to the Corinthians. Many recent translations, however, correctly indicate that Paul is here quoting words from a letter written to him from the Corinthians. The Greek words *peri de* (“now concerning”) here and in 8.1; 12.1; 16.1, and 16.12 introduce a new topic that has been raised in a letter from Corinth. The words translated “to touch” are a euphemism for “to have sexual relations.” The following translation in REB is recommended as a model for other languages: “Now for the matters you wrote about. You say, ‘It is a good thing for a man not to have intercourse with a woman.’”

Keywords

1 Corinthians 7.1; context; euphemisms; quotations; KJV; punctuation

Introduction

There are many ways one could approach the general topic of the King James New Testament. One could talk about its text, which was based essentially on the Greek text published by Theodore Beza in 1598,¹ which, in turn, basically followed the text published by Erasmus. The KJV contains

¹ The KJV actually departs from the Beza text of 1598 in about 160 passages (Scanlin 1985, 136).

words (e.g., 1 John 4.19) and verses (e.g., Acts 8.37) that have been *added* to the original text or that have been *omitted* from the original text or have simply been changed.² The Revised Version of 1881 contains corrections of the KJV text at more than 5000 places (Craig 1951, 44).³

One could talk about words and phrases in the Greek text that were not correctly understood by the KJV translators (Lewis 1981, 46–48). One could talk about inconsistencies in the spelling of people and place names in which the translators sometimes followed the Hebrew form, sometimes the Greek form, and other times the Latin form (Lewis 1981, 48). Why, for example, Jeremiah, Jeremias, and Jeremy? Or why Hosea and Osee or Jonah and Jonas?

There are also many places where the same *Greek* word or expression is translated with various English words when no difference in wording or meaning exists in the Greek text (e.g., *katargeo* in 1 Cor 13.8–10). Conversely, there are numerous places where one *English* word has been used to translate different Greek words which have a difference in meaning (Lewis 1981, 48–51; Craig 1951, 47).

The use of italics could be a study in and of itself. Why were some words which were added in italics added at all? And why were some words added and not italicized?⁴ Or one could consider the infelicitous sentence and verse divisions which mislead the reader (Lewis 1981, 51–52).

The list of words in the KJV that are no longer in current use or that have different meanings is long and well known (Lewis 1981, 53–60).⁵ This, of course, is not the fault of the seventeenth-century translators.

I am not going to discuss any of the above, but rather I will look at how the translation of one text in the KJV New Testament has affected how English-speaking Christians for several centuries have misunderstood the apostle Paul. In other words, my concern here is not with the correctness or incorrectness of the KJV translation but rather with how readers have (mis)understood the translation. Many books have been written in recent years about the history and influence of the KJV translation on the English

² See Lewis 1981.

³ According to Orlinsky and Bratcher, there were 5788 changes based on the text and 36,191 changes made for other reasons (1991, 43).

⁴ Originally, the words that were added were in roman type and the rest of the text was in black-letter type. Only later were the added words indicated by italics (McGrath 2001, 250).

⁵ See also the list of over 500 such archaic and obsolete words in appendix B in Burke 2009, 243–58; and the long list in vol. 3 of *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 499–504. For a broader look at archaic features in accidence and syntax as well as vocabulary, see Partridge 1973, 105–38.

language,⁶ but there is little written about how the KJV has shaped the theologies of Christian communities. To paraphrase my colleague Phil Noss, who was writing about the impact of Bible translations on shaping the theology of the local Christian church (Noss 2002), perhaps because we scholars have been oriented toward the tasks of exegesis and translation, we have paid little attention to what follows translation.

But first a bit of personal history. I grew up on a farm in Illinois in the 1950s and early 1960s. One of the still-vivid images I have of those years is of my father opening his black leather-bound King James Bible on Saturday night after the television western *Gunsmoke* and preparing the Sunday School lesson that he would teach to the adult class the next morning. Sometime when I was around the age of six or seven, my parents were given a new Bible—the Revised Standard Version. It didn’t look much like a Bible with its hard back and red cover. I guess my dad didn’t think so either, because I never remember seeing it any place except in his desk drawer. The worn, black leather King James always lay on the stand by his chair. It was his Bible and it was mine. William Smalley has correctly stated, “so close is the identification of Bible with translation that for many people in the world their translated Bible is the Bible” (Smalley 1991, 1).⁷

I went off to college in 1964 and during my freshman year I became involved with a Christian group on campus called the Navigators. As some of you may know, the Navigators stressed the memorizing of Scripture verses, and we memorized from the KJV, even though by then the RSV was well established and other modern translations were beginning to appear. I attended a Navigator conference one weekend during my freshman year, and I still remember the main speaker quoting 1 Cor 7.1 from the King James: “Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: *It is* good for a man not to touch a woman.” The speaker then proceeded to tell us young hormone-crazed college students that we fellows didn’t need to “touch” a young lady when we helped her take off her coat, and that we didn’t need to

⁶ See, e.g., Bobrick 2001; McGrath 2001; Daniell 2003; Nicolson 2003; Campbell 2010; and Alter 2010.

⁷ In the 1970s, I worked in Fada N’Gourma, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) with a translation team translating the Bible into the Gourma language. The translators did not know Greek or Hebrew, so they were translating from French translations since this was a former French colony. One of the missionaries working in Fada N’Gourma told me that when they were on furlough in South Carolina, a Baptist church member offered to help pay for the Gourma translation as long as the translators were translating from the King James Bible! The American didn’t know what to think when the missionary responded that the translators did not know English!

“touch” her when we opened the door to help her get into the car. I didn’t agree with his comments, but back then I also couldn’t disagree that that was what Paul said: “*It is good for a man not to touch a woman.*”

This personal story is, I think, illustrative of how the KJV affected thousands, indeed millions, of Christian readers for several centuries. I hasten to add that the KJV was not the only major-language translation that read this way in 1 Corinthians. Segond, Almeida, Reina-Valera—to mention only translations in French, Portuguese, and Spanish—also gave literal translations of this verse. Without footnotes to indicate alternate translations or alternate texts, readers have felt that they were reading an uninterpreted translation, indeed, not even a translation at all. Of course, the original KJV *did* contain notes: cross-references, readings of other manuscripts, and literal translations of more freely translated phrases in the text (Newman 1981).⁸

In the space that I have, I want to look at the KJV translation of this text in 1 Corinthians and show why most modern scholarship has rejected the rendering in the KJV.

I Corinthians 7.1

Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε, καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἅπτεσθαι·

There has long been a widespread understanding among American Christians that Paul had very negative attitudes toward marriage. As Victor Paul Furnish wrote, “there are those who think that in these matters [women’s rights], at least, the Apostle’s personal biases were so substantial that his teaching can no longer be taken seriously” (1985, 29). Richard Hays states the matter even more directly: “Paul’s discussion of sex and marriage in this chapter has been widely misunderstood in the history of the church. . . . The view is widespread that Paul despised women and thought sex was dirty or defiling” (1997, 111). It is certainly not my concern to rescue Paul, for Wesley Ariarajah was surely correct when he wrote, “It is very important to realize that Paul was a man of his times. . . . It is futile to attempt to prove that Paul had views on women and the family that would satisfy us today” (1996, xiii).

But when we recognize that the KJV translation of 1 Cor 7.1 misleads us, then maybe Paul was not as negative toward marriage as people have

⁸ According to Metzger 2001 (75–76), the original printing included about nine thousand marginal references and nearly as many marginal notes. According to F. H. A. Scrivener, there were 8422 marginal annotations in the whole Bible, including the Apocrypha (Kohlenberger 2009, 48). See also Rhodes and Lupas 1997.

assumed.⁹ Most interpreters today recognize that the main point of ch. 7 is not marriage itself, but rather the place of sex within the Christian life. Most interpreters, and modern translations, recognize that the question was raised by Christians in Corinth who had written to Paul, saying that it is better for a Christian man not to have sexual relations with his wife in order to be more spiritual.¹⁰

There are three reasons that many interpreters and translators have misunderstood the meaning of this verse:

1. The nature of ancient writing practices is one factor that makes interpretation and translation of this verse difficult.
2. The possible use of a euphemism in Paul's world, which is not recognized today in translation as a euphemism, is another factor.
3. A misunderstanding of the context in 1 Corinthians is a final factor which has led to misunderstandings and mistranslations, or inadequate translations, of this verse.

Ancient writing practices

Greek and Latin writers from the New Testament period sometimes introduced quotations from famous authors by indicating that they were quoting a certain author (see Titus 1.12, for example), and sometimes by expecting their readers to recognize a well-known quotation without actually stating that they were quoting someone else (see 1 Cor 15.33). In correspondence between friends, a writer sometimes quoted words from the friend's letter and then responded to the friend's comments. At times the beginning of the quotation is easily determined because the writer introduces the quotation with words such as "you say." The ending of the quotation is not, however, marked in any way, so modern translators of these ancient writings must determine where to end the quotations. We find such identification of quoted material in Paul's writings (see 1 Cor 1.12; 2 Cor 10.10).

Quotation marks were simply not used in the ancient texts. Nor do modern editions of the Greek New Testament use quotation marks in the Greek text. (I might add that it is not just the ancient Greek which contains

⁹ As long ago as the early twentieth century, Robertson and Plummer wrote, "This passage is sometimes criticized as a very low view of marriage" (1914, 133). Centuries earlier, Augustine took this verse as the reason for rejecting sexual intercourse for mutual enjoyment even within marriage (*Confessions* 2.3).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Menoud 1951; Bruce 1971, 66; Talbert 1987, 37; Fee 1987, 266–78; Hays 1997, 110–18; Horsley 1998, 95–100; Dunn 1998, 692–96; Collins 1999, 251–61; Roetzel 1999, 145; Thiselton 2000, 487–509; Sampley 2002, 868–73; Garland 2003, 242–66; Johnson 2004, 108–109.

ambiguity of punctuation. Samuel Hornsby, quoting Hebel and Hudson, notes that “Frequently the original punctuation [of English Renaissance poetry] has left the meaning ambiguous” [1973, 139].¹¹

In fact, the original New Testament manuscripts, as well as manuscripts for the next few centuries, were written in a style called *scriptio continua*,¹² that is, without breaks between words, sentences, and paragraphs, and without punctuation within sentences or at the end of sentences. Copyists of manuscripts a few centuries later began making breaks between words and adding marks of punctuation, but these breaks represent their understanding and not necessarily the intention of the authors.¹³ Modern printed critical editions of the Greek New Testament segment the text into sentences and paragraphs and add marks of punctuation, but the decisions of the editors do not always agree.

This may be interesting information, but what has it to do with Paul’s letters and their translation? Just this: beyond question, the apostle Paul quoted from written and/or oral correspondence from his readers when he wrote to them (see 1 Cor 1.12). Nearly all New Testament scholars believe that, in addition to the quotations to which he refers, Paul’s letters, especially 1 Corinthians, contain other quotations from letters and oral reports of the Christians to whom he is writing.¹⁴ These are not introduced directly as quotations by words such as “you say,” but it is assumed that these quotations would have been recognized by the readers as their own words. It seems clear to an increasing number of scholars and translators today that 1 Cor 7.1 is one such passage in which Paul quotes words from a letter that has been written to him. But before looking more closely at that verse, let us look at the matter of euphemisms.

Euphemisms

The use of euphemisms is common in most, if not all, cultures. There is a reluctance to speak directly about certain subjects such as sexual acts and sexual organs, excretory functions, disease and death, and matters related to

¹¹ Quoting J. William Hebel and Hoyt H. Hudson, eds., *Poetry of the English Renaissance* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1929), iv.

¹² See Metzger 1981, 31; Omanson 1998.

¹³ See Metzger 1981, 31–32; Aland and Aland 1989, 287. Systematic separation of words and sections of the text did not occur until the eleventh century, and punctuation and accentuation were of an elementary nature until the seventh century (see Vaganay and Amphoux 1991, 8–9).

¹⁴ See Omanson 1992. Probably the most comprehensive study of possible quotations in 1 Corinthians is Hurd 1965.

the holy.¹⁵ Americans, for example, may refer to someone's death by saying that he or she has "kicked the bucket." French people have an equally vivid euphemism: "he broke his pipe" (*il a cassé sa pipe*). Americans may indicate that someone is dead by saying that "she is six feet under." The French express the same thought by saying that he is "eating dandelions by the root" (*il mange les pissenlits par la racine*).

The ancient Greeks were no exception; they also used various euphemisms. For example, the Greek word *haptesthai* means literally "to touch." Such is the translation of this Greek verb in most literal translations of 1 Cor 7.1. But it is now known that "to touch a woman" occurs nine times in ancient Greek writings, and in every case it is a euphemism which refers to sexual intercourse (Fee 1987, 275).¹⁶

The context of 1 Corinthians 7.1

Starting in ch. 7 with the words Περὶ δὲ, Paul begins to answer questions that some Christians in Corinth had written to him.¹⁷ Just as in a letter from the Emperor Claudius to the Alexandrians, the words Περὶ δὲ introduce a new topic. But more importantly, these words also clearly introduce topics raised by the Alexandrians. Most likely, Περὶ δὲ functions in the same way here in 1 Cor 7.1, and in 8.1; 12.1; 16.1; and 16.12.¹⁸

The Bible de Jérusalem has a major section heading here called "Solution de divers problèmes," which covers chs. 7–14. In these chapters, Paul takes up questions that the Corinthians have written to him, and he gives his answers. But in each case, he agrees only in part with what they say. For example, we learn from ch. 8 that some Christians were claiming that they had "knowledge" that false gods do not really exist, so it was acceptable, they claimed, to eat meat from the marketplace which had been consecrated to idols. Paul takes up their statement "all of us possess knowledge." But

¹⁵ See Ellingworth and Mojola 1986. See also Gross 2003; Boswell 2009. For a rather thorough consideration of euphemisms in the Bible, see Pope 1992.

¹⁶ See also BDAG, 126.

¹⁷ For a good discussion of this understanding, see Foulkes 1996, 185–90.

¹⁸ See the discussion and examples cited by Stirewalt (2003, 66–77, 139). The *Stuttgarter Erklärungsbibel* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992) has the following note: "Ab Kap. 7 antwortet Paulus auf eine Reihe von Anfragen der Korinther, die im Griechischen alle mit der gleichen Formel eingeführt werden (7,1.25; 8,1; 12,1; evtl. 16,1). Wahrscheinlich spricht V. 1b nicht die Meinung des Paulus aus, sondern zitiert eine These der Korinther." ("Beginning with ch. 7, Paul responds to a series of questions from the Corinthians, which are all introduced by the same formula [7.1, 25; 8.1; 12.1; perhaps 16.1]. It is likely that v. 1b does not represent Paul's view, but quotes an assertion of the Corinthians.")

then he immediately qualifies their claim by adding “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Returning to ch. 7, we see the same approach. Some Christians had written, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman.” Paul agrees in part, but he immediately qualifies his agreement by writing, “But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife . . .” As one reads all of 7.1–7 it is clear that some Christians had suggested that a person may be more spiritual by giving up sexual relations with his wife. Paul agrees in part that a person may be able to devote himself or herself more fully to prayer if they abstain from sexual relations for a short time (v. 5). But he warns readers that both the wife and the husband have the right to expect sexual relations with the other (v. 4). If one abstains without the consent of the other, there may well be temptation to find someone else (v. 2). So Paul advises that abstinence be practiced only by agreement between the husband and the wife and that it be for a limited time only (v. 5).

Since the Middle Ages, interpreters have attributed the words of 1 Cor 7.1b to Paul himself. That is, interpreters thought that Paul himself was encouraging men not to have sexual relations with women. For many readers in today’s world, Paul has seemed like an ascetic who was not sympathetic toward marriage. But once we recognize that Paul is quoting in 7.1 from a letter written to him,¹⁹ then the sense of vv. 1–7 is quite different.

The translation of 1 Corinthians 7.1

Traditional translations

Translations in nearly all languages have been based on the traditional understanding of this passage since the Middle Ages. The following Spanish translation, like the KJV, attributes the advice of 7.1b to Paul himself:

Acerca de lo que me habéis preguntado por escrito, digo: Bueno le sería al hombre no tocar mujer. (RVR 95)

Notice that in this translation the euphemism is translated literally as *no tocar mujer* (“not to touch a woman”). Unless readers know that this is a euphemism in Greek, how are they to understand the sense? Moreover, no quotation marks are used, so readers will naturally assume that these words,

¹⁹ This interpretation goes back as far as Origen in the early third century (Fee 1987, 273; Talbert 1987, 37). According to Fee, this interpretation appeared in English as early as F. W. Farrar’s *The Life and Work of St. Paul* in 1879.

whatever they mean, are Paul's own words of advice to the Corinthian Christians.

Modern translations/traditional interpretation

Some modern translations, influenced by modern principles of translation, translate the meaning of the euphemism at the end of this verse. But they continue to support the traditional interpretation that these are Paul's own words and his own advice. Consider the following translation:

Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. (NIV)²⁰

Modern translations/modern interpretation

An increasing number of interpreters and translators are now accepting that these verses make more sense if v. 7.1b is read as a quotation.²¹ The following translations, for example, place quotation marks around these words. They do not, however, make as clear as possible where the quotation comes from. Nor do they all make clear the meaning of "to touch a woman."

Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote: "It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman." (NAB 1991)

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." (NRSV 1989)

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." (ESV 2001)

More and more translations, however, are making the following points clear:

1. Paul is quoting from a letter from Corinth. This is especially clear when words such as "You say," are added to the translation. Obviously not all Christians in Corinth took this position; that is why they wrote to Paul. A better translation, therefore, is "Now for the matters you wrote me about. Some of you say, 'It is good . . .'"

²⁰ The TNIV (2001) is a considerable improvement over the NIV: "Now for the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband."

²¹ Evidence that this is true can be seen by the use of quotation marks in The Common English Bible (2010), a translation done by 115 international biblical scholars from 22 denominations.

2. As noted above, the end of the verse has to do with sexual relations; translations such as “not to marry” (NIV; TLA, quoted below) are incorrect translations of the Greek idiom.
3. Paul goes on in the next verse to state why he does not agree completely with what they have written to him.

Now for the matters you wrote about. You say, “It is a good thing for a man not to have intercourse with a woman.” (REB 1989)

J’en viens à présent aux problèmes que vous soulevez dans votre lettre: “C’est une excellente chose, dites-vous, qu’un homme se passe de femme.” (Sem 1992)

Nun aber zu dem, was ihr geschrieben habt! Ihr sagt: “Das beste ist es, wenn ein Mann überhaupt keine Frau berührt.” (GuNB 1997)

J’en viens maintenant à ce que vous m’avez écrit à savoir, “il est bon pour l’homme de s’abstenir de la femme.” (BJ 1998)

En la carta que recibí de ustedes me preguntaban si está bien que la gente ne se case. (TLA 2004; notice that the direct quotation has been turned into an indirect quotation.)

Conclusion

While the KJV has, in general, been communicative and helpful to many lay readers over the years, there can be (as with any Bible translation) these texts such as 1 Cor 7.1 where rather literal renderings can work against communication and the translation can end up misleading readers. The translation of 1 Cor 7.1–7 in the KJV is no longer the best way to translate these verses. The KJV translators took a fairly formal-equivalent approach, so we don’t know whether they themselves misunderstood the text or were just being literal. Since their whole focus was on a translation that would be easily understood by common folk when the translation was read aloud, I lean toward thinking they misunderstood. Regardless, what they produced has certainly been misunderstood. Of the existing translations in English, the NET Bible (2005) most likely expresses most accurately the intended meaning of the Greek text:

Now with regard to the issues you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” But because of immoralities, each man should have relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband.

The following paraphrase of 1 Cor 7.1–2 by Richard Hays clearly expresses the sense (words in italics are added by Hays to clarify the situation):

(1) Now I will respond to the matters about which you wrote. *You propose that, for the sake of holiness and purity, married couples should abstain from sexual intercourse. As you say, "It is a fine thing for a man not to touch a woman."* (2) But—*since that is unrealistic*—let each husband have sexual intercourse with his own wife and let each wife have sexual intercourse with her own husband. (1997, 117)

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Bible versions cited

BJ	Bible de Jérusalem
GuNB	Gute Nachricht Bibel
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NAB	New American Bible
NEB/REB	New English Bible/Revised English Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIV/TNIV	(Today's) New International Version
RSV/NRSV	(New) Revised Standard Version
RVR	Reina-Valera revisada
Sem	Bible du Semeur
TLA	Biblia: Traducción en lenguaje actual