

A King James Vocabulary Lesson

John W. Welch and Kelsey Draper

John W. Welch is a professor of law at Brigham Young University and editor-in-chief of BYU Studies. Kelsey Draper is a senior studying humanities with an emphasis in English.

In 2011, the Christian world will celebrate the quartocentennial of the publication of the King James translation of the English Bible. The King James Version (KJV) has survived well and continues to stand as one of the most nearly literal English translations. But as with all translations, its rendition of the language of the Bible is useful only “as far as it is translated correctly” (Articles of Faith 1:8). Accordingly, Church scholars continually revisit original texts and seek to uncover the full meaning of any passage of scripture. In this brief note, we hope to alert readers to a few of these problems so they can be aware of these potential trouble spots.¹

Modern-day readers of the KJV may have difficulties understanding the intended meaning for a number of reasons and on many different levels. For one thing, since 1611, the English language has changed significantly (as all language does with time). In fact, some of the words in the KJV have dropped entirely out of modern English. On some occasions, these words are simple, and the 1611 meaning may not seem to significantly alter the interpretation of the text today; but in other passages, even a slight misunderstanding of what one word means changes the doctrine significantly.

In addition, the translators in King James’s court were Shakespeare’s contemporaries, and they spoke or were influenced by Elizabethan English or the older English used by Tyndale and other early Bible translators. Thus, modern readers of the King James Version encounter some of the same obscure words and language as

do readers of Shakespeare or Chaucer. Some expressions in the KJV assume a high vocabulary level. Words such as “propitiation” (Romans 3:25 and 1 John 2:2, meaning “atonement”) or “stanced” (Luke 8:44, meaning “stood still”), for example, may press the vocabulary limits and patience especially of some young readers.

Inaccurate translation is another stumbling block to correct understanding, and many readers will totally miss these errors. These words may have a perfectly clear meaning in English today but do not quite convey the actual meaning of the words in the original Greek New Testament writings. For example, virtues listed in 1 Timothy 3:2–4 and Titus 1:7–9 that should be exemplified by a bishop might better be translated “attentive” (instead of “vigilant”), “prudent” (instead of “sober”), “righteous” (not “just”), “a friend to strangers or foreigners” (not “a lover of hospitality”), and “not autocratic” (instead of “not self-willed”). Significant practical and ethical distinctions turn on how these Greek virtues are understood and applied.

Other times, readers think they understand a word but fail to realize what it actually meant two thousand years ago. Thus, the word “lamp” is perfectly understandable today, but if a person thinks of a modern electric lamp, he or she will have a difficult time making any sense of the ten virgins putting oil in their lamps.

In this short vocabulary lesson, we will look at problem words that fall into just two of these categories: first, words that are now archaic and usually unfamiliar, especially to younger readers; and second, words that are easily misunderstood because their usages have shifted. Some of these meanings may be obvious or clear enough from their context, but others may be interesting or obscure enough to deserve particular attention and explanation.

Archaic Words

Some of the KJV’s words are archaic and unfamiliar to modern readers. Fortunately, these are relatively rare. There are not too many of these unknown words to deal with. Here is a compilation of such KJV words used in the New Testament:

Anon. In its earliest usage, it meant “straightway,” “at once,” “forthwith,” or “instantly.” Servants also said it in reply to a command, meaning: “Immediately! Presently! I’m coming!” (Matthew 13:20; Mark 1:30).

To assay. It means “to try on” (clothing, gloves, and so on), “to try or examine” (as in a courtroom), “to attempt” with the connotation of being tempted, or, as in Saul’s case, “to try” or “to attempt” (Acts 9:26).

Divers. *Divers* in Elizabethan times meant “various” or “several,” but as opposed to *diverse*, it does not imply being different (Mark 8:3).

Draught (pronounced “draft”). This refers to the disciples’ act of “drawing in” a fishing net (Luke 5:4). However, it has a very different meaning in Matthew 15:17, where “draught” refers to an “outhouse” or “privy.”

Fair shew. This phrase refers to a “plausible” or “pleasing pretense” (Galatians 6:12).

Goodman of the house. The Latin term for *goodman* is *pater familias*, which means “man of the house” or “householder.” However, the root of the Greek word for *goodman* is the same as the word *despot*, likely implying a negative or tyrannical rule of the house (Matthew 24:43).

To hale. Not often used in modern discourse, *to hale* means to “drag,” “pull,” or “draw away from” with force or violence. Thus, in Acts 8:3, Saul was not merely summoning the men and women to jail but was physically dragging them with force.

Halt. In the context of Matthew 18:8, “halt” is coupled with “maimed,” and the two words’ meanings are subtly differentiated. “Halt” means “lame” or “crippled,” whereas “maimed” is used to describe mutilation or deformity.

To list. It means “to wish” or “to desire” something, much as the words *wish* and *want* today. One could “list” to taste a certain food or “list” to go to sleep when tired (Matthew 17:12).

Mote. In Matthew 7:3, the Savior is referring to a “minute particle,” “speck,” or “chip”—as small as flecks seen floating in a beam of light. It can also be used figuratively, referring to a “fault” or “blemish.”

To set at nought. When Herod “set Christ at nought,” it was not just an inconsequential brush-off (Luke 23:11). The Greek word means literally “from nothing.” In this sense, “to set at nought” means to “value at nothing” or “despise.” In its noun form, *nought* refers to “something that does not exist.”

To redound. When Paul teaches “that the abundant grace might . . . redound to the glory of God,” he means “to overflow” or “to abound” (2 Corinthians 4:15).

To shew again. Christ told his disciples to “shew again,” “to report,” “bring tidings” (from a person or a thing), or “make known openly” (Matthew 11:4).

Sore. This is used here as an adverb to intensify the Apostles’ fear (Matthew 17:6). Some synonyms are “very,” “exceedingly,” “extremely,” and “severely.”

To straiten. The servant in this parable feels “straitened,” which

means “confined” or “pressed upon” on every side (Luke 12:50).

To *trouwen*. Like the German word *trauen*, it means “to trust.” In this context, it is used as a dialogue additive meaning to “think,” “believe,” or “suppose” (Luke 17:9).

***Ware*.** This is basically a shortened version of *aware*, with the same implicit meaning. It also denotes a conscious or cautious “awareness” (2 Timothy 4:15).

***Wist*.** Christ rebukes his mother, “Wist ye not?” meaning “didn’t you know?” (Luke 2:49). This word comes from the English verb *to wit*, meaning “to know” in the sense of knowing some fact, perceiving, or discerning.

***Wot*.** This is the first and third person present form of *wit*, meaning here “I know” (Acts 3:17).

Misunderstood Words

Even more problematic, however, are the words that people think they understand but in reality do not. These words are particularly troublesome because one proceeds with a misplaced sense of confidence. When readers come across the words in the following set, they need to do a double take. They need to stop and reprocess these words. They might look familiar, but they are being used in an unfamiliar way. These English words may or may not reflect the meaning of the underlying Greek. Here are a few words in this category:

To *adventure*. When Paul would not “adventure himself into the theatre” in Ephesus, it means he would not “give himself” or allow himself to go there (Acts 19:31).

To *approve*. As used in Phillipians 1:10, this word means to “test,” “evaluate,” and “learn,” as well as to “approve.”

***Convenient*.** The things that are “not convenient” in Ephesians 5:4 are things that are “unbecoming, unseemly, improper.”

***Couch*.** This is a bed, not a piece of furniture found in one’s living room (Luke 5:19).

***Emulation*.** By preaching to the Gentiles, Paul wishes to “provoke [some of the Jews] to emulation,” which means that he wants to make them zealously jealous (Romans 11:14).

***Hard*.** When one building was “hard to” another, it meant that they shared an adjoining wall (Acts 18:7).

***Instant*.** This word can have a lot of meanings. Jesus’s accusers were “instant with loud voices,” meaning “insistent” (Luke 23:23). When Paul exhorts people to “continue instant in prayer,” the word means “persistent” (Romans 12:12). When people besought Jesus “instantly,”

it means “urgently” or “hopefully” (Luke 7:4). When the tribes of Israel served God “instantly,” it means “constantly” (Acts 26:7).

Lewdness. Today, this is defined as personal immorality or wickedness. In its earlier usage, however, *lewdness* meant “ignorance” or “unlearnedness,” either because of ill-breeding or foolishness (Acts 18:14).

Mansions. In the Father’s house (His temple, which models His heavenly realms) are many “resting places” or “dwelling places,” but these places are not necessarily large and spacious (John 14:2).

To observe. When Herod “observed” John the Baptist (Mark 6:20), the Greek word may have meant that Herod “protected” him, “kept him in mind,” or “was concerned about him.”

To occupy. The servants were not just to occupy the property but to “get doing” or “manage” it, as in a business occupation (Luke 19:13).

To open. In Acts 17:3, this means to “explain,” as in opening up one’s understanding.

Particular. “In particular,” as members of the body of Christ, means “individually,” not “especially” (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Peculiar. Being a “peculiar people” does not mean being weird but being “distinctive,” especially in the sense of being “peculiar to someone”—in other words, “belonging to,” as a personal possession (1 Peter 2:9).

Perfection. To bring “fruit to perfection” in Luke 8:14 means “to maturity.” The word *perfect* usually refers to completion or finishing rather than being without error or defect.

Pitiful. Fortunately, when the Lord is “very pitiful,” it does not mean pathetic, but “compassionate, tenderhearted,” having pity on us, being full of sympathy (James 5:11).

To pray. “We pray you” means “we beseech you,” or “we implore you” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

To prevent. When Jesus entered the house, He did not “prevent” Peter, but He “spoke to him first” or “stood in front of him” (Matthew 17:25). In King James’s time, the word simply meant “to come before” or “to act before.”

To provoke. This phrase originally meant “to call forth.” When we are to “provoke” one another to good works, this does not mean that we should annoy, but “to call forth, to challenge” (Hebrews 10:24). The Latin “provocare” means “to call forth.”

Seal. In scripture, this word usually does not mean “to close,” as in licking and sealing an envelope, but to close and to stamp with an official seal or impression.

Several. As used in the parable of the talents, each person was given

an amount according to his “several ability,” not “several abilities.” This means that the Lord gave certain amounts to people according to their “individual abilities” (Matthew 25:15). When two people are obligated under a legal liability that is “joint and several,” this means that they can be held liable together, each for his or her own share, or “severally, individually,” each for the whole amount. The word “several” in Matthew 25:15 is used in this sense.

Spent. When Paul says that he “will very gladly spend and be spent for you,” he says that he will “spend money freely and be completely used up” in the service of his brothers and sisters (2 Corinthians 12:15).

Thought. In saying “take no thought for your life,” the words in the Sermon on the Mount actually mean, “don’t be worried for the sake of your soul” (Matthew 6:25). The point is not that we should not think about our body or our soul but that we need not worry about our temporal or spiritual needs when God is looking after them.

Virtue. When “virtue” went out of Jesus (Luke 8:46), He did not become less virtuous. In this case, “virtue” is the translation for the Greek *dynamis* (“power”), the Latin word for “strength” in this verse being “virtutem.”

Worship. Being promised to “have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee” (Luke 14:10) means to “have the respect or esteem” of the people who eat together with you, your companions, or close associates.

Conclusion and Outlook

Word studies are important building blocks in our ability to read and understand the scriptures. Without too much difficulty, readers can notice the few archaic words in the KJV and learn their meaning. More effort is required to detect words that appear to be clear and readily understood but, in reality, say something quite different or even unexpected.

A few short studies of Greek New Testament words have been published in the *Ensign*,² but much more work of this nature remains to be done to sharpen our understanding of all the many truths contained in this crucial collection of scriptures. Progress is now being made toward the eventual publication of a multivolume commentary on the New Testament, published at Brigham Young University, covering every word and phrase in these writings from the early Apostles and disciples who followed the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the meridian of time. That project promises to bring to light the meaning of many obscure words and phrases in the New Testament, thereby helping to illuminate and clarify the venerable wording of the King James Version of the Bible. **RE**

Archaic Words

Word	Definition	Reference
anon	immediately	Matt. 13:20
to assay	to attempt, try	Acts 9:26
divers	various, several	Mark 8:3
draught	the act of drawing a net	Luke 5:4
draught	an outhouse, privy	Matt. 15:17
fair shew	a plausible pretense	Gal. 6:12
goodman	man of the house, householder	Matt. 24:43
to hale	to drag, draw, pull	Acts 8:3
halt	crippled, deformed	Matt. 18:8
to list	to wish, will, desire	Matt. 17:12
mote	a speck, chip	Matt. 7:3
to set at nought	to value at nothing, despise	Luke 23:11
to redound	to abound, overflow	2 Cor. 4:15
to shew again	to report	Matt. 11:4
sore	very, exceedingly, extremely, severely	Matt. 17:6
to straiten	to make tense, confine	Luke 12:50
to trow	to think, believe, suppose	Luke 17:9
ware	aware, conscious, cautious	2 Tim. 4:15
wist	knew, perceived, discerned	Luke 2:49
wot	know, perceive, discern	Acts 3:17

Familiar Words with Unexpected Meanings

Word	Definition	Reference
to adventure	to arrive, happen	Acts 19:31
amazed	afraid, confounded, bewildered	Mark 6:51
to approve	to test	Philip 1:10
convenient	becoming, seemly, proper	Eph. 5:4
couch	bed	Luke 5:19
dog	person who is wicked in some way	Rev. 22:15
emulation	envy, jealousy	Rom. 11:14
hard	close, near	Acts 18:7

Word	Definition	Reference
instant	insistent	Luke 23:23
instant	persistent	Rom. 12:12
instantly	urgently, hopefully	Luke 7:4
instantly	constantly	Acts 26:7
lewdness	ignorant, unlearned	Acts 18:14
mansion	dwelling or resting place	John 14:2
to observe	to protect, to be concerned about	Mark 6:20
to occupy	to negotiate, manage	Luke 19:13
to open	to expound, interpret, explain	Acts 17:3
in particular	individually	1 Cor. 12:27
passion	suffering	Acts 1:3
peculiar	distinctive, belonging to	1 Pet. 2:9
perfection	maturity	Luke 8:14
pitiful	compassionate, tenderhearted	James 5:11
to pray	to beseech, implore	2 Cor. 5:20
to prevent	to question	Matt. 17:25
to provoke	to call forth, challenge, incite	Heb. 10:24
to seal	to stamp with official seal or impression	John 3:33
several	individual	Matt. 25:15
spent	consumed	2 Cor.12:15
strait	narrow, strict	Matt. 7:13
to tax	to register or enroll in a list	Luke 2:1-5
thought	worry, anxiety, melancholy	Matt. 6:25
virtue	power or energy in a miraculous sense	Luke 8:46
worship	honor or respect	Luke 14:10

Notes

1. Several of these trouble spots have been detected and discussed by others. Footnotes in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible cover some of these words. Sources for this article include Dewey M. Beegle, *God's Word into English* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1960); Ronald Bridges and Luther A. Weigle, *The Bible Word Book* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1960); Alan S. Duthie, *How to Choose Your Bible Wisely*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995); Melvin

E. Elliott, *The Language of the King James Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); Jacobus A. Naudé, review of *The Balance of the NIV: What Makes a Good Translation*, by Kenneth L. Barker, *Review of Biblical Literature* (2002), <http://www.bookreviews.org>; and William Aldis Wright, *The Bible Word Book* (London: Macmillan, 1884).

2. John W. Welch, “New Testament Word Studies,” *Ensign*, April 1993, 28–30; and “Word Studies from the New Testament,” *Ensign*, January 1995, 28–30.