Thee, Thy, and Thou in the KJV Bible

One common complaint about the King James Version of the Bible is that it is filled with archaic language – and that is quite true. For example, Genesis 41:3 mentions the word "kine." How many people today know that this is actually an old word for cattle? There are other archaic words in it as well – right off the top of your head, do you know what "chapiter" or "ague" means?

Most of the time, though, what people are complaining about is not its vocabulary but its use of words like "thee", "thy", and "thou." Since people haven't talked like that in centuries, these words make the KJV much harder to read. What is especially curious, though, is that the KJV has been updated a number of times since its creation in 1611 to modify things like spelling and punctuation, and yet these archaic pronouns are still there. Why have these outdated and difficult-to-read words been left in the text?

As it turns out, there is a really good reason: the word "thee" and the word "you" *do not mean the same thing*. "Thee" is a *singular* word and "you" is a *plural* word. The reason the KJV translators used "thee" and "thy" was to preserve the difference between singular and plural pronouns. The KJV Bible is the only English translation that has done that; all other modern translations have replaced "thee" with "you" and obliterated the difference.

Does it matter? Well, let's take a look at a passage:

Luke 22:31: "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, <u>Satan hath desired to have you</u>, that he may sift you as wheat:
32 But <u>I have prayed for thee</u>, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."

What's actually going on here? Well, now that we know that "you" is plural and "thee" is singular, the passage takes on new meaning. When Jesus said "Satan hath desired to have you", what He means is that Satan has desired to have *the disciples*. We know this because the "you" in that verse is plural and therefore must refer to a group of people. However, when Jesus says "I have prayed for thee" in verse 32, the word "thee" is singular so Jesus must be saying that He has prayed for *Peter*. In other words Jesus is actually saying this: "Simon, Satan wants to destroy the disciples, but I have prayed for you personally. When you are converted, strengthen your brothers."

When we read this passage in the NIV, however, all of those nuances are lost:

Luke 22:31: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.
32 But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Do you see how the meaning of the passage has been obliterated? Here it looks like Jesus is saying "Simon, Satan wants to destroy you, but I've prayed for you." Now, it's true that the online NIV translation has a footnote saying that the "you" in verse 31 is plural, but how many people noticed that footnote or understood it? (For that matter, how many NIV Bibles include that very important footnote? The footnote is missing from the NKJV, and I suspect that most Bibles lack it.) I would guess that of all the people who have read those two verses in the NIV Bibles, very few of them (if any!) realized what was really going on.

The bottom line is this: while the use of "thee" and "thy" in the KJV may be archaic and make the text harder to read, it does have a purpose behind it. That old, outdated language maintains the distinction between singular and plural pronouns, which *can* affect what a passage means. Translations

that don't use that language (including the NIV and NKJV) may be easier to read, but they obliterate that distinction and lose some of the meaning.