

Thee, Thy, and Thou in the KJV Bible

One common complaint about the King James Version of the Bible is that it contains archaic language – and to some extent this is true (although it's actually fairly rare). For example, Genesis 41:3 mentions the word “kine.” How many people today know that this is actually an old word for cattle?

Most of the time, though, what people are complaining about isn't its vocabulary but its use of words like “thee”, “thy”, and “thou.” Since people haven't talked like that in centuries, those words make the KJV harder to read. What's especially curious is that the KJV has been updated a few 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 Why have these outdated words been left in the text?

There's actually a very good reason: the words “thee” and “you” *don't 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's done that. All other modern translations have replaced “thee” with “you” and obliterated the difference.

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

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

What's actually going on here? Now that we know “you” is plural and “thee” is singular, the passage takes on new meaning. When Jesus said “Satan hath desired to have you”, what He meant was that Satan 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 said “I have prayed for thee” in verse 32, the word “thee” is singular so Jesus must be saying He prayed for *Peter*. 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 22:31-32: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. 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 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 online NIV translation have 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 footnote? The footnote is missing from the NKJV, and I suspect that other Bibles lack it as well.) It's quite possible that all the people who've read those two verses in the NIV, few of them realized what was really going on.

The bottom line is this: while the use of “thee” and “thy” in the KJV may make the text harder to read, it does have a purpose behind it. That outdated language maintains the distinction between singular and plural pronouns, which *can* impact what a passage means. Translations which don't use that language (including the NIV and NKJV) may be easier to read, but they obliterate important distinctions and lose some of the meaning.