

Sunday, June 11, 2023—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
 Lesson 208 The AV 1611: Producing A Proper Perspective on the Preface (Leveraging, Misuse & Presentism)

### **Introduction**

- In [Lesson 207](#) we concluded our Apologetic Analysis of Myles Smith’s Preface to the Authorized Version. After considering the work of Brother Christopher Yetzer and Katrin Ettenhuber, I am convinced that the primary function of Smith’s famous Preface was apologetic in nature. One of his main goals was to positively set forth a Protestant case for their view of church history, the scriptures in general, and English Bible translations specifically. As such, it was intentionally designed to defend the Protestant view considering Gregory Martin’s Preface to the Rheims New Testament as a historical backdrop. Therefore, the King James Preface needs to be understood in its proper historical context. It was written at a definitive point in time to address a circumscribed set of then contemporary factors. Consequently, modern attempts to leverage the Preface to support 21st century views of text and translation are ahistorical and guilty of the historical error of Presentism i.e., “the imposition of present-day values and assumptions on individuals and societies of the past.” (Wilson, 103)
- The goal of this Lesson is to shift our focus to the subject of contemporary use of the Preface in terms of leveraging, misuse, and the historical error of Presentism. In doing so, we will address the following in this Lesson.
  - Leveraging & Misuse: Personal Thoughts & Observations
  - Further Thoughts from Brother Yetzer
  - The Error of Historical Presentism

### **Leveraging & Misuse: Personal Thoughts & Observations**

- In preparation for this Lesson, I asked a handful of people the following question, “What do you believe are the biggest misuses of Myles Smith’s Preface by those on both sides of the Text & Translation debate?” Please note that I intentionally asked a cross section of people who take a variety of positions related to text and translation, some are Modern Version advocates, some are not. I wanted to get a diversity of opinions lest I be accused of stacking the deck in favor of my own viewpoint. Moreover, I asked more people than responded. The following is a list of the responses I received to the question.
  - [Timothy Berg](#)— “In my experience the single biggest abuse, by far, is misusing this passage: “...we have at the length, through the good hand of the Lord upon us, brought the work to that pass that you see...”

It is sometimes used to claim that the Translators thought some kind of supernatural influence was upon them and, through them, upon the KJB in some unique way. Usually with the conclusion that they thought their work was error free or inspired in some sense unique from other Bibles.

I have seen extremely intelligent men who I deeply respect make this mistake. It's not just wrong. It's absurd. It's so obviously an attempt to read one's own modern theology into the words of the preface in unhistorical ways. Of course, there is no way this is what Smith meant. Certainly not in any sense in which God's hand was upon the KJB but not on other translations, or on the KJB more than other translations.

Not only is this to blatantly misread the preface itself (where Smith makes extremely clear, in relation to the LXX, that he thinks translators are not prophets, and never produce error free or perfect work), and to blatantly misread the bibliology of the day (where no one ever thought this about an English translation!), it is also to be astoundingly ignorant of British history.

The English had an incredibly high view of God's Providence, and of his working among them in particular. One only need look at the speech and sermons surrounding destruction of the English armada a few decades before the KJB, or the gunpowder plot during the KJB period, to see the extremely high view of providence at work in the age. More than one massive monograph has traced out the English theology of providence at length.

Every positive thing that happened in England was "the good hand of our God upon us." He providentially saved them from the Spanish and the Catholics and brought them money and gave them lands (yes, they saw colonial expansion and the stealing of land from the world as God's gift of providence to them) and so on. The KJB of course, as well, was produced, in Smith's mind (and surely all the others) under this same guiding hand of providence.

However, this has nothing to do with the claim that their work is perfect, or inspired, or somehow has a greater move of the Spirit on it, or any such thing. Such claims are silly, but I see them all the time. In its most subtle form, people just quote Smith without explaining the historical background, and hope readers will draw the conclusion of an inspired or almost inspired translation from it on their own. In more insidious examples, they explicitly claim this and then cite Smith as supporting evidence. Both are misguided approaches which misread the preface.

There are other examples of abuses of the preface, to be sure. Including some which try too hard to make Smith sound like a modern translator or critic. However, in my experience this particular slip, from this side, is the most common and most egregious."

- Dwayne Green— "In a very general sense, I think people often use the preface to either say the translators "Expected their Bible to be the standard English text" or that it decried the idea of KJV Onlyism.
- Steven Hayes—"On the MTC side of the house, two things come to mind. First, it is common that they use the Preface to teach that the KJV translators never believed their translation was "perfect". Second, overused and misapplied is the quote, "the very meanest translation of the Bible in English... is the word of God," which they use as evidence that the KJV translators would have approved of the many English translations we have today; this one might be their most common/egregious error. On the TR/KJV

side, “we” have too often used it to say that since they believed their translation was to be the “principal one”, and that it was “perfect”, that meant they believed it could never be updated; I think your recent studies have shown that was not the case.”

- Nick Sayers—“Definitely #1 “the meanest translation” relates to modern versions. Saying that a variety of senses meaning “alternative readings” like the NKJV footnotes, when it just means like “love” or “charity” not something totally left field. Also, not every marginal note is an “alternative reading.”
- David W. Reid—“1) Misunderstanding of the “perfect” and “better” and “one principal good one” language. 2) Failure to understand choice not to use identity of phrasing.”
- Christopher Yetzer— “I suppose I would say that no matter the quote pulled from it and who is using it, I think the biggest misuse on both sides are two things. 1) Not understanding the nature of the preface and its purpose in 1600s England and in book culture in general. 2) Acting as if all the translators are speaking in unison. I’m not saying that they would have all agreed, but I think there should be some effort made to consider whether they would have or not.”

### **Further Thoughts From Brother Yetzer**

- Brother Yetzer elaborates on his second point extensively in his currently unpublished essay “The Very Vulgar.” Yetzer addresses this point in “Part 3: The Preface Constrained” in which he discusses the extent to which Myles Smith represented the views/thinking of the other fifty plus translators.
  - “Because the preface is the words of just one translator, it is not always known how well it represents all the translators or the historical truth in general. . . In order for one to claim “the translators believed” in reference to words in the preface, there should be some effort made in analyzing if the words might reasonably have been believed by all the translators or if there is any external evidence to support the claim being made. Some of Smith’s statements are upheld by separate witnesses and others seem to be refuted by them (or at least show a toned-down version of them). here” (Yetzer, 6, 10)
- Diodati’s English Annotations (a translation of the footnotes from his Italian Bible) and the English Annotations written by a group of Englishmen (first printed in 1645) are used by Brother Yetzer as a historical case in point. Yetzer demonstrates by citing the Prefaces to these different editions of annotations that one or more of them is not accurate in how they represent the nature of the work. Yetzer’s main point in tracing this history in a paper about the King James Bible is as follows:
  - “The point here is only to demonstrate that in the 17th century the preface was a commercial product of publicity and secondarily that the authors of them often had agendas and at points were errant or dishonest.” (Yetzer, 7)

- Therefore, Brother Yetzer cautions against viewing Myles Smith as speaking for all the translators, in total. He offers the following statement from subsection twelve “An Answer To The Imputations of Our Adversaries” as a case in point, “for we have seen none of theirs of the whole Bible as yet.” This statement seems to conflict with latter statements made in subsection fifteen regarding the Catholics use of words like *azimes*, *tunike* (tunic), *rational* (breastplate), *holocausts*, *praepuce*, and *pasche* with “*tunike*” and “*rational*” only occurring in the Douay Old Testament which was published in two volumes in 1609 and 1610. (Vance, 319) How can Smith say in one place that the translators had never seen a “whole Bible” produced by Roman Catholics and at the same time quote from the Preface to the Douay Old Testament? We offered the following possible explanation in [Lesson 204](#).
  - “In this statement from subsection twelve Smith seems to be saying that the translators, i.e., “we”, had not yet seen a Roman Catholic copy of “the whole Bible as yet.” Yet in subsection fifteen Smith cites word usage choices from both the Old (1609 and 1610) and New (1582) Testaments of the Douay-Rheims Bible. How are we to reconcile these seemingly contrary statements from the pen of Myles Smith? In my mind, the most charitable interpretation is to view Smith as speaking on behalf of all the translators in subsection twelve who indeed had not seen “the whole bible as yet” put forth by their Roman Catholic adversaries since the Old Testament was not yet available when the bulk of the Company work took place between 1604 and 1609. Whereas, in subsection fifteen of the Preface, it is arguably written in late 1610 or early 1611 as the final preparations for the press were underway. Therefore, Smith in his person would have had the liberty to inspect the Douay Old Testament in its entirety before authoring the Preface.”
- With this example in mind, Brother Yetzer’s caution regarding not taking every statement made by Smith at face value appears to have merit. Brother Yetzer provides examples of how historical corroboration helps sustain some of Smith’s claims in the Preface. Please consider the following examples.

#### *Example 1*

- “Miles Smith in the KJV preface: “Neither did we think much to consult the translators or commentators, Chaldee, Hebrew, Syrian, Greek, or Latin, no, nor the Spanish, French, Italian, or Dutch;”

KJV dedication to King James: “For when your Highnesse had once out of deepe judgment apprehended, how convenient it was, That out of the Originall sacred tongues, together with comparing of the labours, both in our owne and other forreigne Languages, of many worthy men who went before us, there should be one more exact Translation of the holy Scriptures into the English tongue;”

Oxford company translator George Abbot in *The Reasons Which Doctor Hill Hath Brought for the Upholding of Papistry* 1604: “There is not in the world, any fit meanes to come to the right sence of Scripture, which our men doe not frequent. They seeke into the Original tonges, wherin the booke of God was written. They conferre translations of all sortes: they lay one text with another, & expound the harder by that which is lesse difficult: they compare circumstances of Antecedents and Consquents: they looke to the Analogy of faith prescribed in the Creede of the Apostles, They search what the first Councels did establish: they seeke what was the opinions of

the Fathers concerning textes in question, and refuse not therein to cope with you about the highest points...”

Westminster company translator Roger Fenton, “...we doe with all diligence embrace those meanes which God hath provided for the interpretation thereof: not onely the rules of reason, and humane arts sanctified by God’s grace, in his faithfull servants, but adding thereto also the record of antiquitie: consent of fathers: testimony of learned men: conferring places, waighing circumstances, examining translations, with such like: not singling any one meanes from the rest (as you fondly imagine) but joyning them together...”

Second Cambridge Company translator John Bois: In his notes taken during the general meeting in London he cites the Rheims New Testament at Colossians 2:18, Latin at Romans 9:6 and 1 Corinthians 9:5, “old Interpreters” at 1 Corinthians 11:10, Septuagint at 2 Timothy 2:19, Italian at Revelation 7:15, “major number of translators” at Hebrews 10:12 and “others” is mentioned throughout.

Secondhand testimony: John Selden who was a friend of several translators said, “The Translation in King *James’s* time took an excellent way. That Part of the Bible was given to him who was most excellent in such a Tongue, (as the *Apocrypha* to *Andrew Downs*); and then they met together, and one read the Translation, the rest holding in their Hands some Bible, either of the learned Tongues, or *French, Spanish, Italian, &c.* if they found any Fault they spoke, if not, he read on.”

Textual analysis: Comparing the text itself is difficult because of the number of possible sources consulted and the fact that those sources commonly agree with one another. Here are some possible examples: Genesis 23:6 most translations have something like “Prince of God”, but the KJV translates it as “mighty prince” similar to the 1588 Pastors and Professors of Geneva French Bible which read “Prince excellent”; Genesis 37:36 most of the previous English translations have “chief steward” or something similar, but the KJV has “captain of the guard” similar to the Reina’s 1569 Spanish Bible which read “capitan de los de la guarda”; Hebrews 11:28 most English translations had “effusion” but the KJV uses “sprinkling” similar to Diodati’s 1607 Italian Bible which read “spruzzamento”<sup>86</sup>; Matthew 9:4 most English translations had “seeing” but the KJV uses “knowing” possibly following the quote by Chrysostom; 2 Corinthians 2:10 most English translations had “in the sight” but the KJV uses “in the person” like the 1582 Rheims; 1 Corinthians 7:35 most English Bibles had “separation”, but the KJV uses “distractio” like Beza’s Latin translation which read “distractio”.

Through these varied witnesses we can see that in this case Smith seems to have accurately represented at least some of the translators and portions of the translation process.” (Yetzer, 10-11)

### Example 2

- “Another example from the preface that has some outside agreement is the following statement.

Miles Smith in the KJV preface: “Another thing we think good to admonish thee of, gentle reader, that we have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words...”

KJV translator Daniel Featley<sup>88</sup> in *Transubstantiation Exploded* in 1638: “The same word in divers places of Scripture may be diversly taken, according to the diversity of the matter and circumstances of the Text.”<sup>89</sup>

Textual analysis: “*dabhar* (word or thing) is translated by eighty-four English words, *panim* (face) by thirty-four, *sim* (to set or place) by fifty-nine, *shubh* (to turn back) by sixty, *nasah* (to lift up) by fortysix, *abhar* (to passover) by forty-eight, and *rabh* (much) by forty-four.” (Yetzer, 11-12)

- After providing the above examples, Brother Yetzer states the following:
  - “So while some of the preface is substantiated by other sources, it is not true that every word of the preface accurately and universally represented the opinions of all the translators, even though Smith’s intention was certainly to do so, as much as his agenda would permit. KJV researcher Timothy Berg, in talking about the section of the KJV preface titled *A satisfaction to our brethren*, has noted that Smith’s, “rebuttal of Puritan objections to the project for example could hardly be said to reflect the thinking of, say, John Rainolds.” Newman and Houser pointed out that their co-author’s work made clear that, “King James knew why he wanted another translation, though his motivations may not have exactly paralleled those articulated by the translators[sic] in the Preface”

Clearly not all the translators could have ratified the final draft of the preface given that a few of them had died before Smith began the first draft. Besides that, there seems to be some evidence that at least a few of the translators might have disagreed with some of the wording in the preface or at least in their writings they worded things with less embellishment.

. . . KJV researcher Timothy Berg has summarized, “I think it is wise to speak of the preface as having a “sole author” (Miles Smith) who was commanded to write “in the name of all the translators” (to quote from the editor of his 1632 collection of sermons). This can help us most fruitfully dialogue without the - to my mind unwarranted - claims that “all the translators” either agreed perfectly with Smith at every point, or disagreed in unison with him at any point.” (Yetzer, 12, 14)

### **The Error of Historical Presentism**

- Douglas L. Wilson is the author of an essay titled “Thomas Jefferson and the Meaning of Liberty.” The piece originally appeared in the November 1992 issue of *The Atlantic*. Among other things, the piece covers the historical error of “presentism” i.e., “the imposition of present-day values and assumptions on individuals and societies of the past.” (Wilson, 103) In the following excerpt Wilson applies the error “presentism” to Thomas Jefferson and the era of America’s founding.
  - “In this selection, a distinguished Jefferson scholar reflects on this “many-sided and multi-talented man,” especially on his contradictions concerning slavery and race. In doing so, Douglas Wilson raises a crucial point about the perils of presentism — that is, of intruding today’s values and attitudes upon the past. To do that, he warns, is distorting

history. What annoys him is that too many Americans today seem unable to discuss the past in its own terms, unable "to make appropriate allowances for prevailing historical conditions." (Wilson, 102)

- "Presentism" is the term that historians use for applying contemporary or 'otherwise inappropriate standards, to the past. An awkward term at best, it nevertheless names a malaise that currently plagues American discussions of anything and everything concerning the past: the widespread inability to make appropriate allowances for prevailing historical conditions. The issue of presentism is hardly new, but it has perhaps been amplified of late by the debunking and revisionist spirit of the times and the effect this has had on public perceptions. As the uncritically positive and unabashedly patriotic approach that for so long characterized the teaching of American history in the public schools has abated, the emphasis has steadily shifted to the problems and failures of the past. The saga of the glories of the old West has thus given way to a saga of exploitation and greed. Pride in conquering the wilderness has yielded to the shame of despoiling the land and dispossessing the indigenous peoples. What seems to have happened is that a laudably corrective trend has predominated to such an extent that the emphasis seems somehow reversed, and parents complain that they scarcely recognize the history their children are taught." (Wilson, 106)
- It is my contention that "presentism" clouds modern readers from properly contextualizing the Preface to the King James Bible. As a result, modern standards and praxis regarding Textual Criticism, and Modern Version advocacy are imposed upon the Preface in an ahistorical manner. This is done by contemporary interlocutors who seek to rhetorically leverage the Preface and advance the argument that the King James translators would have agreed with them. I think parties on both sides of text and translation debate do this to varying degrees.
- In the next Lesson we will consider Brother Joshua Barzon's 2022 book *The Forgotten Preface* as an example of "Presentism" when it comes to the Preface.

### Works Cited

Wilson, Douglas L. "[Thomas Jefferson and the Meaning of Liberty](#)" in *The Atlantic Monthly*. November 1992.

Yetzer, Christopher. "The Very Vulgar" Unpublished Essay.