

B Q&A

A Bible Question you may be afraid to ask:

Why Does God Talk Weird?

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Biblical Quotations

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Why does God talk weird?

Dost Thou Findeth the Bible Confusing?

If you did not grow up in a religious family, and never looked at a Bible when you were young, you may have been puzzled the first time you heard someone pray over a meal. Perhaps you were invited to a religious friend's home for dinner, and heard something like this:

“Oh Lord, we thank Thee for Thy bounteous blessings and ask that Thou mayest bless this food to our use and wouldest bless each one that eateth at this table.”

It is certainly reasonable that you might think after hearing this that God must talk weird, since your friend doesn't talk this way to you! And if you later picked up the family Bible from your friend's coffee table and looked through it, your suspicions might seem to be confirmed:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis 2:16)

“Regular people” just don't talk that way! What's with all the “thous” and “-ests”? Is there a special kind of English that God speaks? Will He refuse to pay attention to you if you pray with the same words you use to talk to your friends?

Many people are curious to know more about God and Christianity, so they try reading the Bible. But too often they get bogged down in all the thees and thous, -ests and -eths and give up in frustration, exclaiming, “The Bible is just too hard to understand!”

How about you? Have you been frustrated whenever you have tried to learn more about God because the Bible seems to be written in a foreign language? By the end of this booklet, you should have some answers that will help you.

History of the Bible

In order to understand more about how “God talks,” you need to understand a little bit about what the Bible is and how we got it.

There are so-called *holy books* in the world that were written by one person, during a very short period of time. The *Koran*, the holy book of the Moslems, was written in Arabia by Mohammed in the 7th Century. The *Book of Mormon*, holy book of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (official name of the Mormon group with headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah), was prepared by Joseph Smith, an American of the 1800's. He claimed to have translated the words of the book from golden plates he found in the ground near his home with the help of an angel. Is this similar to the origin of the Bible?

Most people, including many people who consider themselves active Christians, aren't really sure. They don't know when the Bible was written, who wrote it, what languages it was originally written in. The majority of homes in America (including homes where no one ever goes to a church service or reads the Bible!) have at least one Bible. Almost every motel room in America also has a Bible, placed there by the Gideon Society. Most of these are labeled "King James" Bibles. Yet the average person has no idea who King James was, why his name is on a Bible, and what the difference is between his Bibles and other Bibles.

Here are some basic facts you need to know to understand the Bible:

- **The Bible is not *one* book, written by *one* person. It is really a *library* of 66 short documents by a variety of authors collected together under one cover.**

The first 39 of these documents are combined in Christian Bibles into the section of the Bible called the *Old Testament*.

The oldest of these Old Testament documents were written over 3,000 years ago. The most recent of these documents were written over 2,000 years ago, before Jesus lived on Earth. All were originally written in the *Hebrew* language.

The last 27 of the documents are combined in Christian Bibles into a section called the *New Testament*.

These documents were all written shortly after Jesus lived on Earth, about 2,000 years ago, in a span of less than 100 years. It is probable that all were originally written in the *Greek* language.

- **The Bible has been translated many times over the past 2,000 years into many languages.**

For over 1,000 years after the time of Jesus, most translations were into Latin. During this time in history, the average person had very little education, and could not even read his own language, let alone Latin! Therefore almost the only people who could read the Bible were educat-

ed priests in the Catholic Church. The “common people” only knew those things in the Bible they were taught by the priests. They could not study the Bible for themselves. In fact, even if he could read, the average person could not have afforded his own copy of the Bible. Modern methods of printing were only invented about 1400 AD. Before that time, all copies of the Bible would have been laboriously made by hand-writing. Such a handwritten copy would have been very expensive to produce.

For a time it was **unlawful** to translate the Bible into the common language of people in European countries. The penalty for doing so could have been death! The religious leaders of the time were concerned that Bible students might question the teachings of the institutional Church if they were able to read the Bible for themselves. But there were individuals willing to risk the penalty. And the religious authorities were right. By about 1500 AD, translations were being made in many countries. And large groups of people were questioning the teachings of the Church leaders.

This history all brings us to the questions we noted earlier about the King James Bible: Who was King James, and why did he have a Bible with his name in it, and how is it different from other Bible translations?

During the 1500’s, the Church in England decided to break away from the Roman Catholic Church and establish its own beliefs and church government. Up to this time, there had been several translations of the Bible into the English language. But none was consistently used in all English churches. The Church leaders were also not satisfied that the best possible translation was available. So the English King, James I, commissioned a group of the best Hebrew and Greek scholars of the Church of England to make a new translation. They published the result of their efforts in 1611.

Since that time, the Bible translation they made has been called the *King James Bible* or *King James Version* (of the Bible), abbreviated as KJV. It was considered such a fine translation that it became the standard Bible throughout the English-speaking countries for the next 300 years.

Your first exposure to the Bible was likely a King James Version. It is the one quoted at the beginning of this booklet—the one with all the *thees* and *thous*. And because most folks know nothing about the history of the Bible, many think that there is something particularly “holy” about the language of this Bible translation. It is the only Bible they have ever known. They think the way it “talks” must be the way God talks. They forget that the original writers wrote in Hebrew or Greek. They forget that the Bible is available in the language of countries all over the world. And they have not realized that God communicates to each person in that person’s own language.

If you have never studied a foreign language, you may never have considered the fact that good translations don't just translate *words*—they translate *thoughts* and *meanings*. If I want to talk about a heavy thunderstorm in English, I may say it was “raining cats and dogs.” A translator who wants to convey my **meaning** to a Spanish person will not repeat the Spanish words for “cats” or “dogs” but will use Spanish words that convey the thought of heavy rain.

So does God talk with *thees* and *thous*? Must we use *thee* and *thou* in our prayers to be “respectful” to God? Many modern Americans don't realize that the **common man** in 1611 used *thee* and *thou* in his every-day language. So a good translation of the Bible for that man would use those words. It would also use the other common words that man would use in conversation.

Many Bible readers have no conception of how much the English language has changed over the centuries. They may realize some of the wording in the King James Bible is a little confusing, but even some of the wording they may **think** they understand may have a totally different meaning now than it did in 1611.

Just to give you a feeling for the changes over the years in English, consider this passage, written in about 1390 AD in the English of that time:

Geoffrey Chaucer *Canterbury Tales*

Whan that Aprille with hise shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich liquor,
Of which vertue engendered is the flour,
When Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne
And small foweles maken melodye
That sleepen al the nyght with open eye-
So priketh hem nature in hir corages
Then longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.

Obviously, some of the problem here is different ways of spelling! But even allowing for that, few modern readers would “have a clue” what Chaucer was trying to say.

So let's try a modern translation:

When April with his showers sweet with fruit
The drought of March has pierced unto the root
And bathed each vein with liquor

That has power to generate therein and sire the flower;
When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,
Quickened again in every holt and heath
The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun
Into the Ram one half his course has run
And many little birds make melody
That sleep through all the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage.

As you can see, this makes a little more sense, but is still not the way the average person talks today! Reading things written so long ago takes **effort!**

But the King James Bible was written over 200 years later. So perhaps the language of its time is not so far from our own. Let's consider something else written less than 20 years before the King James Bible: a section of one of Shakespeare's plays:

William Shakespeare **1597 A.D from the play *Henry IV***

[First Carrier]: Heigh-ho! an it be not four by the day, I'll be hanged:
Charles' wain is over the new chimney, and yet our horse not packed.
What, Ostler!

[Ostler]: Anon, anon.

[F.C.]: I prithee, Tom, beat Cut's saddle, put a few flocks in the point;
poor jade, is wrung in the withers out of all cress.

[Second Carrier]: Peas and beans are as dank here as a dog, and that is
the next way to give poor jade the bots...

[F.C.]: God's Body! the turkeys in my pannier are quite starved. What,
Ostler! A plague on thee! hast thou never an eye in thy head? Canst not
hear? An 'twere not as good deed as drink, to break the pate on thee, I
am a very villain. Come, and be hanged! hast no faith in thee?

As you can see, this would make very little sense to the average American in the 21st century. Yet it was the common language of its time. One simple example from the King James Bible will show how misleading the wording can be to someone not aware of the changes in English. In one passage, Jesus says

“Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:14)

The only common usage of the word *suffer* in modern English has to do with physical or emotional *pain*. Is Jesus saying that children should be made to suf-

fer to come to Him? No—the meaning of suffer has changed dramatically in 300 years. In 1611 its meaning was *permit*. (One remnant of this connotation left in modern English is the term *suffrage* regarding the ability to vote. *Women's suffrage* campaigns in the 1800s and early 1900s were aimed at getting women the *permission* to vote.) Thus Jesus was simply saying to *permit* little children to come to Him.

So—let's answer the question posed at the beginning of this lesson: Why does God talk weird?

The answer: He doesn't! He inspired the writers of the books of the Bible to write in their own common language. The information, thoughts, and ideas they wrote were to be preserved for all Mankind throughout all time.

In order to communicate that same information, those same thoughts and ideas, it was necessary to translate the Bible into the common language of each place and time. The King James Bible was an excellent translation for the time and place it was created. For those who are willing to take the time and effort to study it, to learn what the unfamiliar words and phrases mean, it is still an excellent translation.

But there have been many advances in understanding of the culture, customs, and language of the ancient Hebrew and Greek-speaking civilizations since 1611. Newer translations can take advantage of that scholarship to convey the meanings of some Bible passages more clearly to the modern reader. And for those unfamiliar with the archaic words and phrases in the KJV, a modern translation will be much more effective in conveying the meaning intended by the original authors. Thus, for the average person just beginning to learn about God, it might be best to start with a modern translation. Many good ones have been made in the last 50 years. Two which are recommended by many Christian scholars are the *New International Version (NIV)* and the *New American Standard Bible (NASB)*.

For more in-depth Bible study later, it will be important and useful for you to have and compare several translations, including the King James Version. If you would like some assistance in sorting through the various Bible translations and Bible helps that are available for serious Bible students, request a copy of the *Bible Study Tool Box* booklet from the *Basics of Bible Literacy* series.