

Reprinted from "As I See It," 19:3

Baptists and the American Standard Version of the Bible
by Doug Kutilek

The *American Standard Version* (ASV) of the Bible was published in 1901. It is occasionally referred to in writings of that era as the American Revised Version (ARV), or even, the American edition of the English Revised Version (ERV). This latter designation gives some indication of its pedigree. When the revision committee for the English Revised Version was organized in 1870 by the Church of England (the same religious body behind the King James Version), a sister advisory committee of Biblical scholars in America came into existence. Unlike the King James Version committee, which was composed of only Anglican scholars, the Revised Version committees included scholars from other non-Catholic denominations, including several Baptists. Serving on the English committee were Baptist scholars Joseph Angus, Benjamin Davies and F. W. Gotch, while on the American committee were T. J. Conant, Horatio Hackett, Howard Osgood and A. C. Kendrick. The ERV Bible was published in 1885, while the ASV, delayed by contract with the English Revisers, was issued in 1901.

Baptists have historically recognized that Bible translation is never a "finished" task, since all living languages change over time and a rendering that was originally accurate and clear can become beclouded or even misleading as the language evolves. In addition, the state of Bible scholarship has not stagnated, but there are continuing advances in determining the precise wording of the Biblical text, and the meaning of the original Greek and Hebrew.

That the ERV differed from the KJV in many details (it was a *revision*, after all, not a *reprint*) disturbed some people. Charles Spurgeon who began using and often preaching from the ERV when it appeared, addressed these emotion-laden concerns, --

-

"Concerning the fact of difference between the Revised and Authorised Versions, I would say that no Baptist should ever fear any honest attempt to produce the correct text, and an accurate interpretation of the Old and New Testaments. For many years Baptists have insisted upon it that we ought to have the Word of God translated in the best possible manner, whether it would confirm certain religious opinions and practices, or work against them. All we want is the exact mind of the Spirit, as far as we can get it. Beyond all other Christians we are concerned in this, seeing we have no other sacred book; we have no prayer book or binding creed, or authoritative minutes of conference; we have nothing but the Bible; and we would have that as pure as ever we can get it. By the best and most honest scholarship that can be found we desire that the common version may be purged of every blunder of transcribers, or addition of human ignorance, or human knowledge, that so the word of God may come to us as it came from his own hand." **Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit**, 1881, pp. 342-3.

The KJV itself was a revision (“with former translations diligently compared and revised” reads its title page) and intended improvement of the Bishops’ Bible of 1568, which was in turn a revision of the Great Bible of 1539, which itself was a revision of still earlier versions in a line back to Tyndale’s English New Testament of 1526. The King James’ translators themselves in their “Translators to the Readers” praised the practice of revising English Bible translations for cause, to make them clearer and more accurate.

The ERV, but especially the ASV, was soon widely acknowledged to be on the whole a significant improvement in precise accuracy over prior English versions, though it lacked the perceived stylistic charm of the KJV, and did have a handful of objectionable renderings or notes.

Anyone who attended Baptist Bible College in its first 25 years knew that Noel Smith, founding editor of the Baptist Bible Tribune, regularly used and recommended the ASV to his students. Dr. Smith was not alone in commendation of the ASV. In a book written around 1967, Dr. Richard V. Clearwaters, founder of Central Baptist Seminary of Minnesota and Pillsbury Baptist College, and widely recognized during his lifetime as a “Fundamentalist’s Fundamentalist,” wrote:

“Honesty compels us to cite the 1901 American Revised as the best English Version of the original languages which places us in a position 290 years ahead of those who are still weighing the King James of 1611 for demerits. . . . We know of no Fundamentalists . . . that claim the King James as the best English translation. Those in the mainstream of Fundamentalism all claim the American Revised of 1901 as the best English translation.” **The Great Conservative Baptist Compromise**, pp. 192, 199.

From 1901 until the 1970s, the ASV served several generations of Bible-studying Christians, when it in turn was superseded by a revision, the New American Standard Bible. Baptists had a hand in that revision as well.