

**PSALM 12:6-7**

\* \* \* THE ENGLISH BIBLE AND THE PROCESS OF PURIFICATION \* \* \*

S.L.H.  
Soli Deo Gloria!

“The words of the LORD are pure words, *like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times*. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation forever.” (Psalm 12:6-7)

**Introduction.** In Psalm 12:6-7, the psalmist (David) likens the purification and preservation of “the words of the LORD” to the metallurgical process of refining silver. While silver is not a totally inert metal, it is largely unreactive with oxygen and nitrogen. For this reason, impurities in silver are generally not chemically bound to the atomic structure of the metal, but are rather discrete particles physically dispersed throughout the metal. This makes purifying silver straightforward. Melting silver in an air atmosphere and holding it at temperature for a period of time allows oxygen and nitrogen atoms from the atmosphere to diffuse into the liquid and preferentially react with the impurity atoms (rather than the silver atoms); since the oxide and nitride impurity compounds are generally less dense than silver, they float to the top of the melt and form a dross than can be easily removed. As Psalm 12:6 suggests, not all the impurities are removed in the first pass, but repeatedly performing this refining process will eventually result in a pure silver ingot.

**The Analogy Applied.** Applying this metallurgical analogy to “the words of the LORD” (i.e., the text of the Bible) reveals several truths.

First, the text of the Bible can become contaminated with impurities. In 2 Corinthians 2:17, the Apostle Paul asserts that deliberate attempts to corrupt “the word of God” were underway as early as the 1st century. Examination of the roughly 6,000 extant Greek manuscripts of the New Testament readily reveals that no two are exactly the same<sup>1</sup>; thus, the Greek manuscript tradition is not pure (i.e., perfect); it contains impurities.

Second, the text of the Bible can be purified. But like the process of purifying silver, a single refining pass is not expected to be adequate. While Psalm 12 is certainly poetic in genre, and “seven” is a number often used in the Bible as a symbol for perfection or completion, nevertheless a literal understanding of Psalm 12:6 suggests that purification passes applied “seven times” should be expected before a pure product is obtained.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that whereas Alexandrian-type Greek manuscripts are massively corrupted (differing significantly from each other as well as Byzantine-type manuscripts), even Byzantine-type Greek manuscripts, which are the vast majority of extant manuscripts, contain relatively small numbers of differences among themselves. Thus, even the Byzantine textual tradition of the New Testament contains impurities.

Third, God has promised to purify and preserve the text of the Bible by means of such a process. Modern critical text scholarship cannot be a fulfillment of this promise, as the critical text upon which all modern Bible versions are based (as represented by the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*) is currently in its 28th revision, with many more planned for the future. Furthermore, modern text critics confess they will never achieve a perfect New Testament using their methods with currently extant Greek manuscripts<sup>2</sup>. The fulfillment of God's promise must be found elsewhere.

**The English Bible.** Consider the early history of the English Bible. The first translation of the Bible into English was made by John Wycliffe (and his associates) circa 1384. However, Wycliffe's Bible was a translation made from Latin, not from Hebrew/Greek. The first English translations from Hebrew/Greek arose in the 1500's. William Tyndale published a complete English New Testament translated from Greek in 1526 and had translated a considerable portion of the Old Testament from Hebrew into English prior to his martyrdom in 1536. The remainder of the 16th century saw a steady succession of complete English translations/revisions of the Bible appear<sup>3</sup>. When King James authorized a new translation at the opening of the 17th century, he gave its translators 15 rules to guide their work<sup>4</sup>, two of which were:

1. The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the *Bishops Bible*, to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit.

and

14. These translations to be used when they agree better with the Text than the Bishops: *Tindoll's, Matthews, Coverdale's, Whitechurch's, Geneva*.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible published in 1611 built upon the six outstanding English translations that preceded it (i.e., Tyndale's New Testament, Coverdale's Bible, Matthew's Bible, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops' Bible), it being the seventh revision of the Bible in English (cf. Ps12:6-7). Many Christians consider the King James Version of the Bible to be perfect, without any error (no such claim is made for any other English version); indeed, no instance of factual error or internal contradiction/inconsistency has ever been sustained in the KJV, whereas they seemingly abound in other English versions. The KJV itself underwent several revisions between

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<sup>2</sup> According to Dan Wallace, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and a prominent evangelical text critic, "We do not have now – in our critical Greek texts or in any translations – exactly what the authors of the New Testament wrote. Even if we did, we would not know it. There are many, many places in which the text of the New Testament is uncertain". From Forward in Elijah Hixson and Peter J. Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL: 2019) p. xii.

<sup>3</sup> All the 16th century English Bibles were translated from editions of the Textus Receptus (the Greek New Testament based on traditional, Byzantine-type manuscripts), which was itself in a process of revision/refinement. The common question from critical text skeptics, "Which TR?", has a straightforward answer: the perfect Greek text is that which underlies the King James Version; see Edward F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended* (Christian Research Press, Des Moines, IA: 2006) p. 290.

<sup>4</sup> David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT: 2003) p. 439.

<sup>5</sup> The Bible listed as *Whitechurch's* is more commonly known as the *Great Bible*.

1611 and 1769, but these "revisions" amounted to nothing more than correcting printer errors, standardizing the spelling of words, and changing the typesetting/font. Being the seventh revision of the English Bible, the KJV would seem to be an obvious fulfillment of God's promise to purify and preserve His words (at least in the English language).

**Conclusions.** The King James Bible is a fulfillment of God's promise to purify and preserve His words (Ps12:6-7). Being the product of a seven-fold process of refinement, it represents the pure words of God in English. Existing in printed (digital) form, the pure words of God can be perfectly preserved "from this generation forever". If every extant Hebrew and Greek manuscript were destroyed tomorrow (as so many have been in centuries past), the pure words of God would be preserved in the King James Bible.