For many blacks, there's only one Bible, and it's the KJV

by Adelle M. Banks
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(RNS) On Sundays, C. Elizabeth Floyd, shows up for worship at Trinity Baptist Church of Metro Atlanta, with her Bible in hand.

But the large, black leather Bible with dog-eared pages and hand-written notes in the margins isn't just any Bible: It's the King James Version.

And Floyd, like many African-Americans, wouldn't have it any other way.
It's more than mere tradition. A civil rights veteran called the KJV's thees and thous "romantic," and a scholar spoke of black churches' "love affair" with the king's English.

"That's the one that the Scriptures are read from and that's the one usually that the pastor will preach from," said Floyd, a retired assistant principal, whose church is affiliated with the historically black Progressive National Baptist Convention.

"It's the predominant version of the Bible that's used at Trinity."
More than other Americans, African-Americans have clung to the KJV's 400-year-old elevated prose. According to a recent study by LifeWay Research, only 14 percent of African-Americans have never read the KJV, compared to 27 percent of U.S. adults overall.

The Rev. Cheryl Sanders, an ordained minister and professor of Christian ethics at Howard University School of Divinity, said the KJV's soaring language can uplift listeners, especially those who have been oppressed.

"It's a loftiness to the language that I believe appealed to people who are constantly being told, `You don't count. You're nobody. You're at the bottom rung of the ladder," said Sanders, who has written about black Christians' use of the KJV. "If I can memorize a verse of Scripture, it gives me a certain sense of dignity."

Sanders said she often uses the KJV during funerals and in visits to sick and dying members. "It's more familiar to people," she said, "and it's more comforting."

When one of the nation's largest predominantly black denominations, the Church of God in Christ, published a commemorative Bible to mark its centennial, COGIC leaders chose the KJV.

"I use it 99.9 percent of the time," said Ladrian Brown, 37, who directs a foundation in Kansas City, Kansas, that houses COGIC archives.

Brown's favorite verse from Hebrews -- "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not yet seen" -- gives her a richer understanding in the KJV.

"That Scripture is not as clearly communicated through other translations," she said.

From the pews to the pulpits, the KJV holds a special place in the lives of black churches. Part of it may be emotional, said civil rights icon the Rev. Joseph Lowery, but part of it is because it's the version black church leaders grew up with.

"Although I think young black people are using other translations and finding them useful, we'll always have a sentimental attachment to King James," said Lowery, a retired United Methodist minister who marched with the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. "It's so romantic."

Dallas megachurch pastor Bishop T.D. Jakes said he's memorized so many verses from the KJV that "it's hard to switch" after 35 years of preaching. Although he studies other versions, Jakes said the KJV language is endearing.

"The rich old English language brings to mind a sense of the ancient value of the text," Jakes said.

The version is not without its challenges for African-Americans, scholars say. Its verses about servanthood were used for centuries to justify slavery, and its exclusive language referring to God as "he," and "man" for humankind, can be off-putting to some women who are the heart of the black church.

"I would just modify it or I would look for an inclusive language rendering," said Sanders.

Michael Joseph Brown, author of "Blackening the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship," said black Christians' "love affair" with the KJV extends beyond the worship setting. Many black families use it as a sort of historical scrapbook, documenting important milestones.

"It holds a certain type of authority even for those people who don't use it as a study Bible anymore," said Brown, an associate professor at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. "They'll have a big King James Bible."

Floyd, of the Baptist church outside Atlanta, recalls adding information to her family's big KJV Bible when she was a child.

"That Bible is so old," said Floyd, now 75. "It is still in the family. Leaves are tearing out and falling apart but it is still there with my mother, father, sisters and brothers, and their birthdays."