

THE KING JAMES BIBLE AND THE RHETORIC OF AUTHORITY

Rob Goodman
Duke University

When state churches promote state scriptures and when attitudes toward the kingdom of God lead to conclusions about the kingdoms of the earth, religion and politics become inseparable. Renaissance England spent enormous social and cultural energy on competitive Bible translation, inviting controversies over the nature of God's word and who was fit to receive it. These conflicts led to book-burnings and burnings at the stake and for decades occupied the greatest scholars and the highest levels of government. Bible translations are part of a continuous dialogue: They sample each other's wording and criticize each other in their prefaces, and they compete in the same marketplace. The Geneva Bible (Geneva) and the King James Version (KJV), the era's two most successful translations, are the offshoots of enemy political traditions.

The Geneva Bible was quite literally the work of outsiders—not only members of England's most liberal Protestant faction, but exiles from their country. Their political attitudes were shaped by the repressive regime of Catholic Queen Mary between the years 1553 and 1558. As leading Protestants were being imprisoned and executed, nearly 1,000 Puritans fled to Geneva, the hub of Calvinist scholarship. There the English exiles produced a Bible translation that codified all their hatred of tyranny and hierarchy and was intended for personal study in the Puritan home. The Geneva Bible contains dozens of explicitly antimonarchist footnotes, and much more was left implicit in the wording of the Bible itself.

Geneva's fine scholarship and its "user-friendly" presentation made it England's dominant Bible for more than 50 years. However, King James I, who took the throne in 1603, "could neuer, yet, see a Bible well translated in English; but the worst of all, his Maiestie thought *Geneua* to be" (Barlow 10). After all, Geneva undermined James's governing philosophy of God-given authority. To eliminate this cultural threat to his rule, James ordered a new Bible (KJV), filtered through layers of the conservative church hierarchy, and centrally managed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the King himself. The new Bible would unofficially carry the King's name.

The KJV was the Bible of authority. Read from the pulpit every Sunday, it bound the English people to their High Church and to their king. It was designed, as Adam Nicolson writes, "to elide the kingliness of God with the godliness of kings, to make royal power and divine glory into one indivisible garment which could be wrapped around the nation as a whole" (xiv).

The diametrical opposition of Geneva, Puritan and radical, and the KJV, High Church and royalist, is most strongly observed in the translations' distinct rhetorical strategies. The KJV's strategy is coercion: It settles on its clauses of highest importance and then aggressively highlights them with structural clues that range from rigid parallels to heavy punctuation to pleasing euphony. Geneva, by contrast, is ambiguous: Intended as it was to be read silently and individually, it leaves the questions of importance and clause-hierarchy much more open to interpretation. Of the two, the KJV is clearly

the more emphatic text, and its emphasis serves a constant purpose—the control of audience response, all in the service of a bold vision of a divine monarch and his ordained kings.

The Rhetorical Approach

I examine the rhetoric of the two versions through close reading. I focus on Biblical verses dealing with kingliness, authority, and divine power; selected verses include key words such as “king,” “throne,” “glory,” “law,” and “servant” and key concepts such as the Lord’s battle-prowess; his treatment of the disobedient; and the status of earthly kings, mirrors of God’s own sovereignty but capable of being smashed whenever he chooses to assert his power over enemies. To ensure breadth of scope, I focus on one book from each of the six scholarly companies responsible for translating sections of the KJV¹; within each company, I rely on those books with the most monarchical themes: *II Samuel* (First Westminster Company), *Psalms* (First Cambridge Company), *Isaiah* (First Oxford Company), *I Maccabees* (Second Cambridge Company), *Romans* (Second Westminster Company), and *Revelation* (Second Oxford Company). I compare verses from each of the six books with respect to three rhetorical elements: expansion, parallelism, and prose stops.

Expansion

While clauses in Geneva’s sentences tend to be equal in length and emphasis, KJV frequently expands final clauses, adding an extra beat or two to the end of key sentences; verses that are flat in Geneva have their peaks and valleys in KJV. Length may be measured in prose just as we measure it in poetry: by counting stresses. Close reading, writes George Saintsbury, “Is best to be done in prose, as in verse, by the application of the foot-system—that is to say, by studying the combinations of the two great sound-qualities . . . ‘long’ and ‘short’” (viii). These stresses, in turn, arise from our natural reading voices, which owe their ups and down to the Germanic languages from which English derives. According to Ian Gordon’s *The Movement of English Prose*, “A second Germanic feature which has shown a remarkable persistence throughout the whole history of English is voice stress. . . . Each word-group contained a point or points where the voice achieved maximum emphasis, these major stresses falling on the stressed syllable of words of semantic importance” (15). In examining verses from the Bible, then, I will look for the points in each sentence at which the reading voice would reach points of “maximum emphasis.” As Gordon further argues, almost all fluent English speakers share the same patterns of stress (15-16), and stress “has remained virtually without alteration to the present day. More than any other feature of the language, it has led to a basic stability in English prose of every period. It is a real foundation of ‘continuity’” (16).

Vocal prose stresses guide measurement of clause length. A sentence whose clauses have an approximately equal number of stresses can be said to be “balanced.” A clause with more stresses than the previous one, or some other point of reference, can be said, with regard to that point, to “expand.”

However, expansion is not merely a writerly ornament; rather, it selectively directs our attention. As George Gopen writes, “A disparity in length between two clauses invokes a disparity of emphasis given by the reader. More often than not, readers tend to give more emphasis to the longer of the two, perhaps because more reading time and energy is expended upon it” (52). In other words, relative clause length gives a sentence its internal hierarchy.

A clause receives emphasis when it is in an unequal relationship to the clause that precedes it, especially when it is a comparative expansion. Furthermore, a clause stands out when it breaks the mold of a sentence; equality in length, conversely, makes it more difficult to determine preeminence. Geneva tends to conform to the latter principle, KJV to the former; Geneva allows our attention to fall where it may, while KJV is much more aggressive in directing it. Take this example from *Psalms* 18:11:

Geneva: He made darkenes his secrete place, and his pauilion round about him, euen dark-
 enesse of waters, and cloudes of the ayre.

KJV: He made darkenes his secret place: his pauilion round about him, were darke waters,
 and thicke cloudes of the skies.

The KJV verse comes in two clear halves, broken by a colon, the second of which is notably longer; it reads almost as a fuller explication of “he made darkness his secret place.” Geneva’s commas, by contrast, more evenly divide the line into balanced fourths:

He made darkenes his secret place, and his pauilion round about him,
 even darkenesse of waters, and cloudes of the ayre.

Geneva gives us four thoughts of equal structural importance, while KJV rearranges them into an opening grace note and an emphatic conclusion.

KJV’s preference for expansion over balance takes two forms: expanding multipart sentences and amplified repetition. Here is an example from *I Maccabees* 14:13-14 of an expanding two-part sentence, in which the addition of only a few words makes a significant difference in balancing:

Geneva: There was none in the land to fight against them: for then the kings were ouer
 come.

He [Simon, the captain of Israel] helped all those that were in aduersitie among his peo-
 ple: he was diligent to se the Law kept, and he toke away the vngodlie, and wicked.

KJV: Neither was there any left in the lande to fight against them: yea, the Kings them-
 selues were ouerthrowen in those dayes.

Moreouer hee [Simon, the captain of Israel] strengthened all those of his people that were
 brought low: the Law he searched out, and euery contemner of the Law, and wicked per-
 son, he tooke away.

Both of Geneva’s verses have equally-stressed halves: three stresses each in verse 13, four each in verse 14. By changing “then” to “in those dayes,” KJV adds an extra stress to the second half of verse 13 and arrives at an expansion of four stresses to five: “**Neither** was there any **left** in the **lande** to **fight** against them: **yea**, the **Kings** themselves were **ouerthrown** in those **dayes**.” In verse 14, KJV’s substitutions result in an expansion of four stresses to six. Geneva and KJV place the same information at the end of each sentence, but KJV’s verses expand, while Geneva’s do not. As a consequence, KJV fixes extra emphasis on each verse’s end, and the resulting two-verse sequence draws our attention to Simon’s power to punish enemies both without and within.

KJV’s language also gains a degree of emphasis through the amplified repetition of key terms and concepts. Where Geneva either puts repeated terms in an equal relationship or arranges the syntax so as to hide the repetition altogether, KJV repeats and expands the second unit, as in *Psalms* 105:8:

Geneva: He hath alwaie remembred his couenant & promes, that he made to a thousand generacions,

KJV: He hath remembered his couenant for euer: the word which he commanded to a thousand generations.

Neither version's restatement is word-for-word, but they both use sense-repetition with synonyms. In Geneva, though, there is no structural distinction between the term as first stated ("couenant") and then as repeated ("promes"). If this were a line from an original poem, one might accuse the author of redundancy. KJV, on the other hand, expands from "couenant" to "the word which he commanded," setting the second half off with a colon, and the fact that it is worthy of such explication makes the covenant the clear focus of the verse.

Expansion helps create KJV's hierarchy of clause importance as set against Geneva's more "democratic" organization. The verses above show most clearly how KJV is unafraid of ordained rank, and they show how that rank is communicated unambiguously to the listener, who hears each verse only once and who must put his faith in the immediate impressions the text forms in his ear.

Parallelism

Expansion, parallelism, and prose stops interact with and build upon one another, and the themes in the previous section will recur, especially with respect to the structural communication of preeminent clauses. In the last example, *Psalms* 105:8, the KJV rendering communicates the importance of the covenant not just through amplified repetition, but through parallelism:

He hath remembered	
his couenant	for euer,
the word which he commanded	to a thousand generations.

In effect, the same message is sent twice, reinforced by virtue of a second hearing. Geneva does echo "alwaie" with "to a thousand generacions," but the parallel structure is not nearly as clear as KJV's.

Parallels can be helpfully illustrated by the colometric, a method developed by, among others, Ronald C. White, Jr. By grouping clauses in columns according to their stresses, White was able to visually demonstrate antithesis in President Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address:

Inaugural address...	devoted altogether to <i>saving</i>	the Union without war...
Insurgent agents...	seeking to <i>destroy</i> it	without war...

One of them would <i>make</i> war	rather than let the nation survive...
the other would <i>accept</i> war	rather than let it perish (62).

The parallel structure opposes "inaugural address" to "insurgent agents," "saving" to "destroy," "make war" to "accept war," and so on; we have a visual sense of the two columns of opposites arranged by Lincoln through similarity of diction and structure. I will apply the same method below. By itself, a colometric proves nothing, but it is a useful tool for illustrating patterns that may evade the eye when text is arranged linearly.

KJV's parallelism is, on the whole, much more rigid and regular than Geneva's, as evidenced in the most elaborate parallel in *Psalms*, 19:7-9:

Geneva: The Law of the Lord is perfite, conuerting the soule: the testimonie of the Lord is

sure, and giueth wisdom vnto the simple.

The statutes of the Lorde are right and reioyce the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, and giueth light vnto the eyes.

The feare of the Lorde is cleane, and endureth for ever: the iudgements of the Lorde are trueth: they are righteous all together,

KJV: The Law of the Lord is perfect, conuerting the soule: the testimonie of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

The Statutes of the Lord are right, reioycing the heart: the Commandment of the Lord is pure, inlightning the eyes.

The feare of the Lord is cleane, enduring for euer: the Iudgements of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.

Both versions give us three equal sentences, each with four parts in parallel sets of two. But until the very last clause, KJV's parallel is the more regular of the two. Each clause ends in a gerundive ("conuerting the soule," "making wise the simple," "reioycing the heart," etc.). Geneva, by contrast, mixes gerundives with regular verbs ("conuerting the soul," "and giueth wisdom," "and reioyce the heart," etc.). Because it breaks such a well-established pattern, KJV's final clause ("the Iudgements of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether") comes with an increased force. Geneva's equivalent ("the iudgements of the Lorde are trueth: they are righteous altogether") is a smaller departure, largely because it maintains the two-part structure of the rest of the passage and is thus less emphatic. KJV's final thought comes as a grand summation, Geneva's as one more example.

Regular parallelism can create emphasis even without the aid of an irregular add-on clause. As in *Psalms* 105:8 above, parallelism can combine with repetition to make a point twice, with enough variation to avoid redundancy and with enough continuity to make the meaning stick. Take the following from *Isaiah* 46:9:

Geneva: Remember the former things of olde: for I am God, and there is none other God, and there is nothing like me,

KJV: Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else, I am God, and there is none like me,

Both verses strive toward some sort of parallelism, but again KJV's is more regular. Geneva gives us a premise ("I am God") and two conclusions ("and there is none other God, and there is nothing like me"). KJV gives us a more majestic redoubling: two "I am God" and two "and there is none." KJV almost reads as if it were designed to be memorized aurally: when the second "I am God" comes, the listener has already been primed by the first.

But KJV's regular parallelism serves other functions besides emphasis; sometimes, it can even shade a verse's meaning. Take this example from *PSALMS* 46:5-6:

Geneva: God is in the midst of it: therefore shal it not be moued: God shal helpe it very earlie.

When the nations raged, & the kingdomes were moued, God thundered, & the earth melted.

KJV: God is in the midst of her; she shal not be moued; God shall helpe her, and that right early.

The heathen raged, the kingdomes were mooued: he vttered his voice, the earth melted.

What looks like plain prose in Geneva's first line comes as a two-part parallel set off by commas in KJV, due to the substitution of "God shall help her, and that right early" for "God shal helpe it very earlie." But more interesting is the second line, where KJV's parallel is again stricter. In Geneva, the nations' rage and the kingdoms' movement read as conditions of God's thunder: "When X happened and Y happened, then God." But in KJV, we have two halves of a sentence separated by a colon and, within those halves, two subunits separated by commas: The heathen and God are set up as parallel entities. And their actions are compared: the heathens move kingdoms, but God melts the earth itself. KJV's parallel structure creates a parallel meaning, which in turn magnifies God's power. Geneva seems more a neutral chronicle and less a qualitative contrast.

All in all, parallelism creates a hierarchical relationship between KJV and its audience in three respects. First, strict patterns lend more force to any clause that eventually violates them, as in *Psalms* 19:7-9. A clause that violates the rules of parallelism is much like a clause that expands: It is preeminent and identified as such by structural clues. And even without a rule-breaking clause, a parallel still draws emphasis and attention to itself, as in *Revelation* 19:18. KJV aggressively conveys an order of rank, while Geneva's more irregular parallels make its own suggestions more passive.

Second, strict parallels are tailored to the listener as opposed to the reader. A reader has unlimited time to consider the relationships in a verse or passage and come to his or her own conclusions; one writing for silent reading can thus take more structural liberties, confident that the reader will grasp the message with a little thought. A listener, on the other hand, has only one chance to grasp parallel relationships as the writer intended; the writer must spell them out more clearly, with little deviation from a set pattern. Moreover, parallels aid aural memory; after a few hearings of KJV's Psalm 19, one can hardly hear "The Law of the Lord is perfect" without instinctively wanting to respond, "conuerting the soule." KJV's parallels establish its desired relationship as text-to-listener. As Norman Lamm argues, text-to-listener is inherently a more didactic and hierarchical arrangement than text-to-reader (14).

Finally, highly regular parallels involve a degree of coercion. The listener is forced, with no ambiguity, into hearing relationships determined by the writer. Consider the "qualitative contrast" reading of *Psalms* 46:5-6, which I argued was strongly implied by the structure of the KJV rendering. Such a reading is possible in Geneva, as well, but so are several others, including the "neutral" reading. Where the structural clues are less emphatic, the reader's liberty is increased. Where parallels are clearer, the listener's range of interpretations is limited. And a central goal of the Jacobean church's public Bible reading, with its community-building and establishment-reinforcing aspects, was the restriction of interpretation.

Prose Stops

Prose stops, the punctuation marks that give each verse its distinctive rhythm, are much more aggressive in KJV. Punctuation creates Stress positions, a sentence's points of highest emphasis, those that convey information with the greatest force. These Stress positions should be distinguished from the purely vocal stresses I considered in the discussions of expansion and parallelism. Vocal stresses occur regularly and derive from the up-and-down pattern of speech, whereas, according to Gopen, Stress positions derive from structure. The Stress position "is produced by the grammatical structure

of a sentence (its syntax) finally reaching its resolution. To put it concisely, a Stress position is any moment of full syntactic closure. *Full syntactic closure happens in English at any properly used period, colon, or semi-colon. . . . A Stress position can never be created by a comma*" (37, emphasis in original). The Stress of closure goes to the unit of thought immediately before a heavy mark of punctuation. Consider the following example from Psalms 18:14, with Stress positions in boldface:

Geneva: Then hee sent out his arrows & scatered them, and he increased lightnings and **destroyed them.**

KJV: Yea, he sent out his arrowes, and **scattered them;** and he shot out lightnings, and **discomfited them.**

Apart from any other structural considerations, the KJV verse reads more emphatically. It substitutes a semi-colon for Geneva's comma and so creates two Stress positions instead of one; it hits the listener twice instead of once. (KJV also sets up a parallel between arrows that scatter and lightnings that discomfit, an organization that is less apparent with Geneva's lone stress.) This multiplication of Stress positions is a consistent theme: KJV uses heavier punctuation than Geneva. In fact, no difference between the two versions is as widespread.

Material that may be passed over in Geneva is assertively called to the listener's attention by KJV. The substitution of a colon for a comma changes an incidental detail into the very point of a sentence (or at least one of them), as here in *II Samuel* 7:16:

Geneva: And thine house shalbe stablished and thy kingdome for euer before thee, euen thy throne shalbe stablished **for euer.**

KJV: And thine house and thy kingdome shall be stablished **for euer before thee:** thy throne shall be stablished **for euer.**

This is a redundant verse; the statement that David's house, kingdom, and throne shall be established forever is three ways of saying the same thing. Seemingly recognizing this, Geneva chooses to emphasize only the last "for euer." But again KJV changes a comma to a colon. One stressed "for euer" is not enough for it; instead, we get two. A single change in punctuation does a significant amount to hammer home to the listener the perpetuity of David's line.

But a colon or semi-colon in place of a comma does more than affect a sentence's Stress; it controls a sentence's meaning. Gopen argues that a semi-colon sends a message about clauses' logical connectedness (and for these purposes I include colons as well, since the two marks are interchangeable in both Geneva and KJV).² Besides creating a Stress position, a semicolon

also promises that another independent clause (with another Stress position) will follow immediately. Proper use of a semi-colon, then, can produce for a reader two Stress positions, two moments of major emphasis, in a single sentence. The unique product of the semi-colon, therefore, is the ability to suggest a relationship between two equally significant clauses more intimate than that between two neighboring sentences [and more semantically equal than that between two clauses linked by a comma]. (163)

Compare the relatively definitive function of the semi-colon (or colon) to that of the more ambiguous comma, which cannot create a Stress position precisely because it is ambiguous. When clauses that are linked ambiguously in Geneva are forcibly yoked in KJV, we see one more example of the latter version's tendency to impose readings.

KJV frequently uses yoked clauses to state the implicit case for kingly legitimacy. While Geneva again prefers a more neutral, “factual” tone, KJV’s punctuation is almost making arguments, as in *Psalms* 29:10:

Geneva: The Lord sitteth vpon the flood, and the Lord doeth remaine King for euer.

KJV: The Lord sitteth vpon the flood: yea the Lord sitteth King for euer.

Each verse presents two facts: The Lord sits upon the flood, and the Lord is king. Geneva lays out these facts sequentially, separating clauses with commas and stressing only the end of each sentence. But KJV separates its facts with semi-colons, putting them in an equal semantic relationship, suggesting, in fact, a causal link. After all, a semi-colon (or colon) says, “X is true; Y is true; and together, X and Y make a larger truth.” So *Psalms* 29:10 does not simply say that the Lord sits upon the flood and that the Lord is eternal king; it says that the Lord is the eternal king who sits upon the flood. The Lord’s kingship and his control of nature are of equal importance. And from there, it is a very short step, almost a necessary one, to the reading, “The Lord sits upon the flood, and *therefore* the Lord is eternal king.” The Lord’s legitimacy is derived from his power.

All of these readings are possible in Geneva, but hardly necessary. Because its verses lack heavy punctuation, they have only one Stress position each, and we are left to emphasize “King,” “glorie,” and “King.” But those terms stand alone; there is no why and wherefore. And so the Lord’s power is subsidiary: He is a king who happens to be powerful, not a king because he is powerful. Take the Geneva rendering of *Psalms* 29:10, which tells us that the Lord sits upon the flood and that the Lord is king, but its comma gives the reader absolutely no suggestions for connecting those two facts. The reader can conclude that they are of equal importance, or that the Lord’s kingship is more important than his physical authority, or even “Here are two independent and unrelated facts about the Lord.” At any rate, the comma gives her a choice. In KJV, there is no choice: The semicolon dictates the relationship and makes the Lord’s claim for the reader, tying together kingship and legitimacy. KJV’s claim for the Lord is stronger than Geneva’s because it comes with arguments embedded in the text.

The translators of Geneva and the KJV turn the same source text into two very different books: one structurally unobtrusive, leaving room for argument, catering to the silent reader, and the other structurally aggressive, constantly arguing, asserting itself over the mind of its listening audience. Whichever style we prefer, we do a disservice to the translators, and to our own educations, when we read the Bible in a vacuum. Those readers without knowledge of Hebrew or Greek are, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, completely in the translators’ hands. Short of picking up another language, the best we can do is understand whose hands we are in: understand, that is, the tastes and the politics that made one Bible into two books. When readers realize that Geneva and the KJV are political as well as religious documents, we are not undermining them or facilely writing them off as “propaganda.” We are simply reading to the fullest—opening them, as we open all great books, with our critical intelligence, our deliberateness, and our autonomy.

Notes

¹ A hugely collaborative project, the KJV translation relied on a team of some 50 scholar-clergymen, divided into six “companies”: two at each of England’s universities and two at Westminster Abbey. Geneva, by contrast, was the work of a single, small group.

² See Parkes 52.

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