

COMMENT AND RESPONSE

A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO ROB GOODMAN

Emily Parsons
Furman University

In his article “The King James Bible and the Rhetoric of Authority,” Rob Goodman provides unique and illuminating insight into the rhetorical differences between the King James Bible (KJV) and the Geneva Bible (Geneva). Goodman is especially deft in his explanation of how expansion, parallelism, and prose stops are used in the KJV to emphasize kingly authority, while the Geneva has a “more ‘democratic’ organization” (49). However, his assessment would be enriched by a deeper understanding of Calvinist theology, which greatly affects the rhetoric of authority in the Geneva. Although such considerations would complicate Goodman’s argument, their inclusion would make his analysis of the rhetoric of authority in the KJV and Geneva more accurate. While Goodman makes excellent, well-proven claims, he also says that “we do a disservice to the translators, and to our own educations, when we read the Bible in a vacuum” (53). In a sense, then, Goodman invites others to help fill the vacuum and, in that spirit, I offer a broader theological and historical context for his comparison. For the Calvinist, God is the only authority on the eternal destiny of human beings’ souls, and his authority is unquestionable. Therefore, it is necessary and appropriate to say that because the Geneva translation was under Calvinist influence, its rhetoric of authority is one that upholds God’s power rather than diminishes it.

Calvinist theology deems that God is and should be recognized as the only sovereign of humanity. The recognition of God’s authority is apparent in four of the five points, or main precepts, of Calvinism: unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints (“Calvinism”). In other words, God is sovereign in choosing the saved, sovereign in making salvation possible, sovereign in saving people, and sovereign in maintaining the salvation of the saved. Indirectly, Goodman admits that this Bible was written to subvert the idea of ultimate human authority, writing that the Geneva “contains dozens of explicitly antimonarchist footnotes,” with many of these sentiments “implicit in the wording of the Bible itself” (46), that can be deemed coercive.

The Geneva acknowledges God’s authority and sees the Bible as a proclamation of his dominion rather than an attempt to persuade the audience of it. In the doctrine of Calvinism, there is no crisis, no controversy, within God’s authority from which rhetoric need arise. If the purpose of rhetoric is persuasion, the Geneva does not need to use it because the Geneva Bible is stating indisputable universal truth. Consequently, when Psalm 29:10 of the Geneva reads, “The Lord sitteth upon the flood, and the Lord doeth remaine King for euer,” the translators did not need to emphasize with a more forceful prose stop the authority of God, as Goodman notes that the KJV does, because they did not assume that God’s authority was contestable. Hence, when Goodman writes that this verse says the Lord’s power is subsidiary to his kingliness, Calvinist theology would disagree because the power and kingliness of God are inseparable and equally expressed.

Moreover, metaphors of God as a warrior and king are equally present throughout both Bibles

within the same verses. 2 Samuel 7:16 of each version contain ideas of God's house and kingdom established forever. God does not literally have a house or physical kingdom; therefore, the metaphor of a king is used to describe his authority and sovereignty. The metaphor is the same in each. Other numerous examples of diction, synecdoche, rhetorical questions, and simile could be cited, all equally explicit in the KJV and Geneva, about the authority of God. A rhetoric of authority is in accordance with the Calvinist theology that shaped the language of the Geneva Bible, even if different in some ways from the rhetoric of authority of the KJV.

Goodman's positive sentiment for the Geneva is evident when he says it is "user-friendly" and written with "fine scholarship" (46). Juxtaposed against these phrases are words such as "coercion" and "control of audience response" to describe the KJV as lacking interpretive choice (46). But in my view, the Geneva is stating a political view, even if less explicitly than the KJV, using its unique rhetoric of authority, which is greatly influenced by Calvinism.

Works Cited

"Calvinism." Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics. 2006. 20 May 2007
<<http://www.reformed.org/calvinism/index.html>>.

Goodman, Robert. "The King James Bible and the Rhetoric of Authority." *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 3 (2005): 46-54.