

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOME CALVINISTIC ASPECTS OF THE NOTES
OF THE GENEVA AND BISHOPS' BIBLES

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The popularity of the Geneva Bible, first published in 1560 after Queen Elizabeth had ascended the throne of England, was an immediate embarrassment to the Episcopal bishops. Its superior translation made all too obvious the deficiencies of its predecessor, the Great Bible. Since the population was fast becoming attached to the Geneva Bible, how could the clergy go on using the Great Bible for public reading in the churches?

The Geneva Bible was the fruit of the labors of Englishmen who went into exile during the reign of Queen Mary and who settled finally in Geneva. There, aided directly and by the climate produced by John Calvin, the great theologian of the Reformation and by Theodore Beza, the great biblical scholar of the day, these men produced this translation. Just who they all were is not certain, but their leader was William Whittingham who married Calvin's sister-in-law and who himself had produced a translation of the New Testament in English in 1557. It is not impossible that Miles Coverdale and John Knox also had a part in the work. The Old Testament was a thorough revision of the Great Bible, the translation being made directly into English from the Hebrew (and Aramaic). The basis of the New Testament translation was Tyndale's version revised with the aid of Beza's Latin version and his commentary. The translation was based on the best scholarship of the day and was done in good idiomatic English. Its reception was immediate, widespread (due in part to its more convenient size and less expensive price) and sustained. No less than 150 editions of the Geneva Bible were printed between 1560 and 1644, and it held its own not only against the Bishops' Bible but also for 33 years

against the King James version.

Nevertheless, the Geneva Bible was never an authorized version (though it was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth). Its popularity, therefore, was disquieting to the authorities of the Church of England. Here was an unauthorized version of the Bible preferred to the one which they had ordered to be read in the churches (i.e., the Great Bible). Furthermore, the important matter of the notes to the Geneva Bible was at the same time one of the chief reasons for its popular acceptance and one of the principal causes for its lack of reception by the ecclesiastical authorities.

The title to the Bible contains these words: "With most profitable annotations upon all the hard places, and other things of great import, as may appear in the epistle to the reader." There are many notes, and much time and effort must have gone into the composition of them. Some are historical and geographical, but many are theological, and the theology of the notes of the Geneva Bible is Calvinistic. It was not only the reading of the Bible in their own tongue that so greatly influenced the British people, but also the study of these notes. Indeed, one suspects that the annotations of various translations of the Bible have exerted a far greater influence than is generally recognized. Bruce's comment is probably an understatement: "One may surmise that the Geneva Bible, translation and notes together, played no little part in making British Puritanism the strongly vetebate movement that it was."¹

¹ F. F. Bruce, The English Bible, 90.

It was these notes which played a large part in motivating the undertaking of the translation of what we now call the Bishops' Bible. The project was directed by Archbishop Matthew Parker who assigned sections of the Bible to various ones for translating. The Great Bible was the basis

for this revision, and the work occupied seven years. When the Bishops' Bible was completed, it was presented to Queen Elizabeth with an accompanying letter from Parker, a part of which said: ". . . beseeching your highness that it may have your gracious favour, licence, and protection, to be communicated abroad, as well for that in many churches they want their books, and have long time looked for this, as for that in certain places be publicly used some translations which have not been laboured in your realm, having inspersed diverse prejudicial notes, which might have been also well spared."¹ The Bible referred to with its "prejudicial

¹John Eadie, The English Bible, II, 74.

notes" is, of course, the Geneva. Yet it must be said for Parker, that while his fellow-bishops were in the process of preparing the Bishops' Bible, he apparently thought well enough of the Geneva version to advocate a twelve years' extension of the exclusive right of printing it to a certain printer. He declared that it would "do much good to have diversity of translations and readings." Although such an opinion is not necessarily an axiom for any day, for his time it was a very sagacious observation.

The Bishops' Bible, however, was never widely accepted by the people. When the call was made for a new translation under James I of England the Geneva version was still the popular Bible of that day. In the discussions proposing the King James translation, James said: "I have never yet seen a Bible well translated into English, and the worst of all. . . is the Genevan." James was not referring to the quality of the translation but to the notes. It was therefore agreed that the new version should not include notes that would limit its acceptance. It would have to be a Bible which would commend itself to both clergy and people and thus supersede both the Bishops' and the Geneva.

What, then, was the character of these notes which so definitely affected the Puritan movement and which motivated two other translations of the Bible? Specifically, what changes did the Bishops' Bible make in the notes of the Geneva?

I. PREDESTINATION AND ELECTION

The number of notes in the Bishops' Bible is much less than in the Geneva, and many of those in the Geneva which were offensive because of their Calvinistic slant are simply omitted in the Bishops'. In some instances the Geneva notes were taken over into the Bishops' without change (or with very minor changes), and in some cases the Calvinism of the Geneva was removed in a substitute note in the Bishops'. For instance, in Romans 6 the Geneva Bible has 19 notes while the Bishops' has only four and only one of the four is taken from the Geneva. On the other hand, all the notes which the Geneva appends to the entire book of Galatians are found in the Bishops' except two which concern alternate readings.¹

¹ The Geneva notes are quoted from the first large folio edition of 1578 (Darlow and Moule, 115) (this is not Tomson's revision of the N.T.) compared with several other later Geneva editions. The Bishops' notes are quoted from the first edition of 1568 (Darlow and Moule, 89).

Notes Changed. It must not be assumed that there is a Calvinistic emphasis in most or all of the notes of the Geneva version. For example, there are approximately 250 notes in the epistle to the Romans and perhaps 10 of them may be said to be Calvinistic. But these were the ones which annoyed the bishops and motivated their work of translation. An outstanding example of a change in the notes is found, as one might suspect, in Romans 9, the predestination chapter. The note in the Geneva is placed with verse 15 and stated:

As the onely will and purpose of God is the chief cause of election and reprobation: so his free mercy in Christ is an inferiour cause of salvation, & the hardening of the heart, an inferiour cause of damnation.

The Bishops', placing the note with verse 11, changed it as follows:

The vyll and purpose of God, is the cause of the election and reprobation. For his mercie and calling, through Christe, are the meanes of salvation: and the withdrawing of his mercie, is the cause of damnation.

While it is evident that the Geneva note is Calvinistic, it must be acknowledged that the Bishops' note can scarcely escape the same label. Indeed, the phrase in the Bishops' "withdrawing of his mercie" is a stronger statement of the cause of damnation than the Geneva's "hardening of the heart."

A rather mild note on Luke 4:6 in the Geneva Bible underwent change in the Bishops'. Concerning Satan's power to offer our Lord the kingdoms of this world, the Geneva translators remarked that Satan is "but prince of the world by permission, & hath his power limited." The Bishops' simply says that Satan was "usurping the empire of the earth."

On the other hand, the note in the Bishops' Bible at Romans 11:35 states the doctrine of election unequivocally, whereas the Geneva version's comment is innocuous. The latter simply explains the verse this way: "That is, provoked him by his godd workes." The Bishops' translators elaborated as follows: "By this, the Apostle declareth that God by his free vyll and election, doth geve salvation unto men, without any desertes of their owne."

One is forced to the conclusion that thosenotes changed do not show any clear trend in the Bishops' to eliminate the Calvinism of the Geneva annotations.

Notes Retained. Interestingly, a note in the Geneva on an important predestination verse is retained verbatim by the later version. On 1 Peter 1:2

"elect according to the foreknowledge of God the father" both Bibles have the same note; namely, "The free election of God is the efficient cause of our salvation, the material cause is Christ's obedience, our effectual calling is the formal cause, and the final cause is our sanctification." In comparison, Calvin wrote that the efficient cause of our salvation is the mercy of the Father; the material cause, Christ's obedience; the formal cause, faith; and the final cause, the proof of divine justice and the praise of God's goodness.¹

¹John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, III, 14, 17.

In addition, the Bishops' Bible also retains many of the chapter headings and descriptions of the Geneva Bible. In particular this is true of the headings to Romans 9 and Ephesians 1.

Notes Omitted. The chief difference in the notes of these two versions on the subject of predestination and election is not found in the changes or the retentions, but in the omissions. The Bishops' omits most of the Geneva's notes on this subject which give that version its Calvinistic emphasis. Here is a sampling from what undoubtedly could be a very long list. The following notes appear in the Geneva Bible but are omitted from the Bishops'.

Proverbs 16:4: "So that the justice of God shall appear to his glorie, even in the destruction of the wicked.

John 6:37: "God doeth regenerate his elect, and calleth them to obey the Gospell."

John 10:26: "The cause wherefore the reprobate cannot believe" (i.e., because they are not of Christ's sheep).

Acts 13:48: "None can believe, but they whome God doeth appoint before al beginnings to be saved."

Acts 13:48: "

Romans 9:7: "The Israelites must not be esteemed by their kindred, but by the secret election of God, which is above the external vocation."

Romans 11:29: "To whome God giveth his spirit of adoption, and whome he calleth effectually, he cannot perish: for Gods eternall counsell never changeth."

Ephesians 1:4: "This election to life everlasting can never be changed: but in temporall offices which God hath appointed for a certaine space, when the terme is expired, he changeth his election, as we see in Saule and Judas."

Ephesians 1:4: " The principall end of our election is to praise and glorifie the grace of God."

Titus 1:2: "Hath willingly, and of his meere liberalitie promised without foreseeing our faith or workes as a cause to move him to this free mercy."

Thus it was the omission of the Bishops' Bible of notes like these that carried out the purpose of its translators to spare the readers the "diverse prejudicial notes" of the Geneva. By elimination, rather than by change, this purpose was carried out.

II. SALVATION

In the related doctrine of salvation there are several interesting comparisons in the notes of the two Bibles.

A note appears in the Geneva version at 1 Timothy 4:10 which seems strange unless the translators were trying to avoid the concept of unlimited atonement. Concerning the meaning of "Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe" they state: The goodnes of God declareth itself towards all men, but chiefly towards the faithfull by preferring them: and here he meaneth not of life everlasting." In other words, Christ is the Savior of all men in the sense that He bestows temporal benefits on all. There is not note in the Bishops' at this point.

The Geneva translation of Romans 3:25 employs the word reconciliation, whereas the Bishops' more accurately uses propitiation. The accompanying note explains the meaning as a "pacifying of Gods displeasure."

At 1 Corinthians 9:27 there is what Eddie has called a "cowardly" note in the Geneva. For alokimos they chose the translation "reproved" and explained it as reprov'd of men. Eddie apparently feels that one can be finally cast away by God, and that would explain his calling this a cowardly exhibition of Calvinism. "Their theology," he is assured, "bribed them to shrink from the plain meaning of final rejection."¹ The note

¹Op. Ibid., II, 29.

simply says: "Least he should be reprov'd of men when they see him does contrary." The Bishops' keeps the note but employs the rendering which also went into the King James; i.e., "castaway."

A rather normal explanation of Philippians 2:12 "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" appears in the Geneva: "Runne forward in that race of righteousness, wherein God hath freely placed you through Jesus Christ, and conducteth you his children by his Spirit to walk in good works, and so to make your vocation sure." The Bishops' note on this phrase is more concise and quite clear on the relation between faith and works: "Our health hangeth not on our workes: & yet are they sayd to worke out their health who do runne in the race."

A comparison of these notes do not demonstrate appreciable difference between the two versions in the doctrine of salvation. The principal difference in this area of theology is found in salvation's relation to predestination and election as reflected in the different emphases of the two Bibles' notes on those subjects.

A sampling of the notes of the two Bibles on verses which teach the total depravity of man shows little difference between them. Indeed, the Bishops' note at Romans 1:18 is superior to the several notes in the Geneva on this context. It states clearly the reason why men do not know anything of God: "For in the syght of God all men are godlesse, synners, and the children of wrath: & when they knowe any thyng of God, yet they be naught, because they noyther thanke him, nor serve hyu, and therefore plagues are poured upon them from heaven."

On the other hand, the Bishops' has no note at Romans 3:19 (indeed, it used an unusual translation for hupokritos, "indaungered"--the Geneva translates "be culpable"); while the Geneva translators reminded their readers that "the lawe doth not make us guiltie, but doeth declare that we are guiltie before GOD, and deserve condemnation."

On the phrase "and were by nature children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2:3) the Bishops' used the same note as was in the Geneva. It plainly affirmed that this state was "not by creation, but by Adams transgression, & so by birth." This is one of two notes (out of eleven in the Geneva) which the Bishops' has on the entire chapter.

Again, as with the doctrine of salvation, one would deduce that there is no real difference between the emphases of the two versions in this particular area of doctrine. The difference lies in the emphasis on predestination and election in the Geneva Bible which is toned down but not eliminated in the Bishops' chiefly by removing many of the Geneva notes which were in the judgment of the translators of the Bishops' too strongly Calvinistic.