Marginal Deference and the Silence of Absolutism:

Annotation in the 16ll King James Bible

The King James Version offers only slight textual alterations to its forebear, the Bishops’ Bible. Resembling most that bible, with only infrequent changes adopted chiefly from the Geneva Bible (Betteridge 264), the KJV distinguishes itself through its removal of marginal notes. In contrast, Earlier English bibles were glossed much more heavily. The Tyndale Bibles (1525 and 1534) were heavily glossed, The Great Bible (1540) extensively cross-referenced (1540), the Geneva (1560) rigorously glossed, and the Bishops’ Bible (1568) moderately glossed (Sleights 270). It is the Geneva Bible, however, with its overabundance of marginal commentary, that the KJV largely stands against. James detested the Geneva for its inundation of Protestant- and republican-leaning notes (Rather 6) and Protestantism generally for its refusal of the divine right of kings (Opfell 2). In this way, James’s prohibition of marginal notes in the KJV constitutes an imposition of consensus. As this paper will argue, the marginal note’s textual production of difference stood in opposition to James’s absolutist stance. As a site of intersection between public debate and private interpretation, the marginal note compounds difference. It produces a second script discordant with the primary text and thus provides the material and possibility of debate. James’s removal of marginal annotation in the KJV, therefore, acts out a consolidation of both textual and political authority. By ordering the expulsion of the marginal note, James removed the textual platform on which debate could endlessly defer consensus. In doing so, he effected a silencing of dissent, of the note’s denominational content but also of its structure with its capacity to produce and defer meaning beyond the means of either the note or the central text to manage.

James understood marginal commentary and public debate as antecedents to dissent in that they both, by producing difference, subordinate a central authority—either the text’s or the King’s. William Sleights writes, “Just as there are no politically innocent texts, so too are there no politically neutral marginalia” (Sleights 258). James was certainly aware of this fact. Though, at the suggestion of Protestant John Rainolds, during the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, James agreed to a new translation of the bible, he set himself against an annotative text. Where Rainolds likely hoped for the authorization of the popular Geneva Bible, James opposed the Geneva for its excess of marginal annotation, which he called “partial, untrue, seditious, and savoring of traitorous conceits” (Opfell 7). These claims parallel James’s opposition to the Protestant Synod, a meeting of clergy and laymen in determination of doctrine. At the Hampton Court Conference, James responded to Rainolds’s defense of the Synod, stating, “If you aim at a Scottish Presbytery . . . it agreeth as well with monarchy as God and the devil. Then Jack and Tom and Will and Dick shall meet and at their pleasure censure me and my council and all our proceedings” (6). Further, the KJV “Preface” states, “Briefly, by the [Synods] being brought together to a parley face to face, we sooner compose our differences than by writings which are endlesse” (143). The “Preface” states further that the King “had not seen any profit to come by any Synode, or meeting of the Clergie, but rather the contrary” (144). These statements demonstrate a primacy of acquiescence to text-as-King which constitutes scriptural debate as political subversion and the censuring of King as sacrilege. Furthermore, they exhibit an anxiety over private interpretation, particularly for laymen, as well as over the doctrinal interference of contrary marginal annotation upon that private reading. In either case, the possibility of interpretive difference threatens political consensus. That the “Will and Dick[s]” of England could meet and endlessly debate textual meaning meant, for James, the indefinite suspension of English unity—a fundamental precept to his rule. James’s prohibition of marginal note, then, constitutes a silencing of both existent and possible dissent.

While the marginal note presents itself as a locator of textual meaning, its very appearance at the edge of the page constitutes a separate script that concedes the possibility of multiple readings as it produces scriptural dialogue in conjunction with the central text. This process requires some explication. While the note’s apparent role is to secure meaning in an ambiguous passage, it cannot help but ascribe its own meaning. The Geneva note to 1 Corinthians 2:13 reads, “As that we teache is spiritual, so ó kinde of teaching must be spiritual, that y wordes may agree with the matter.” The taught meaning must equal, both in spirit and content, God’s word. And yet, the referent passage reads, “Which things also we speake, not in the wordes which mans wisdome teacheth, but which the holie Gost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual things” (Geneva 1 Corinthians 2:13). The note, of course, speaks in the language of man’s wisdom and not in the spiritual. Its aim is to make the passage knowable to those who cannot simply receive the spirit of the text. The note is never an equivalency of the referent passage. Were it, the note would constitute a redundancy. Instead, the note must in some way alter the sense of the text. It must make it manageable, understandable or, more cynically, conform to a doctrine that does not fit the text.Implicitly, the note presents itself as an overriding authority over the central text. While it claims to illuminate the text, it also holds the capacity to sway the primary material as a second and authoritative text containing the real meaning. This process is particularly evident in the Geneva Bible.

Cumulatively, the Geneva notes constitute a text unto themselves and present a Protestant methodology for reading and being in the world. In this way, the Geneva notes have the capacity to replace the central text, not requiring it to convey their reading. The Geneva Bible’s notes for John 14, for example, express a particular expectation of the divine.

E Therefore we must begin in him, continewe in him & end in him.

F For the verie fulnes of the divinitie remaineth in Christ.

L So called because he worketh in us the trueth.

M Which thíg he doeth by ý vertue of his Spirit.

N He shal sensibly feele ý the grace of God abideth in him.

S In that, that Christ has become man to be Mediator betwene God & us. (Geneva 14:6-24)

The transference of meaning to a commentary text means that the central text becomes a mere sign pointing to the text containing the real meaning. The commentary deprives the text of authority. It stands above the text. In his moment of doubt, the reader turns to the commentary for reassurance and is in turn provided with a dependable understanding. From the above annotation alone, the reader understands that divinity is experienced only through Christ, that it is complete in Christ, that it will remain in Christ, and that it is Christ alone who may mediate between self and God. The referent passage is no longer required, for even if the sense is not the same, the reader does understand something of the second and now dominant text. The reader infers the non-divinity of the Church and that it is Christ who must mediate the experience of God, not the Church. The commentary, ironically, replaces the Church as mediator and as the Church’s textual and spiritual authority erodes so too does the King’s. The KJV’s “Dediction” pronounces James as “that sanctified person, who, under God, is the immediate author of [His Majesty’s loyal and religious people’s] true happiness” (Opfell 141). As head of the Church of England, much of James’s authority lay in his claim as mediator between God’s word to his subjects. Yet the reader understands there is a difference between the claims of the King and those of the text’s commentary. As interpretive differences produced by the marginal note erode the King’s claim, the King himself is differentiated from the text. David Norton writes, “Not only does such editorial material control and limit the text’s imaginative possibilities in a ruthlessly doctrinal way . . . but it breaks up the singleness of the reader’s engagement with the text” (Norton 163). While Norton touches on the note’s ability to interrupt both the text and the reader’s interaction with it, he does not touch upon the imaginative possibilities that the note in conjunction with the text produces in the reader.

In the same moment as the note declares its authority, it also demonstrates the indeterminacy of a locatable meaning. From its place in the margins the note produces difference. This difference is itself productive of further possible meanings. Meaning is transferred from its already ambiguous position within the primary text to a limbo position between text and commentary. The discordance between the two texts holds understanding at bay and defers meaning. Sleights argues, “There are, of course, many other models of the relationship between side-note and centred text . . . [One such model] finds a conversation occurring between margin and text. The dialogic tensions growing out of this conversation generate meanings that are not strictly resident in either place” (Sleights 258). Similarly, Jacques Derrida writes, “This time, ‘in other words’ does not put the same thing into other words, does not clarify an ambiguous expression, does not function like an ‘i.e.’ It amasses the powers of indecision and adds to the foregoing utterance its capacity for skidding” (Derrida 62). In this way, ultimate understanding becomes an ephemeral site, a horizonal and intertextual point that retreats even as it is approached.

Confronted with intersecting texts and nonequivalent senses, the reader is more unsure of the text’s meaning than at the start. And yet, as the note differentiates and disperses meaning, the reader’s necessity for understanding is all the more urgent. For this reason, the reader is compelled to choose it. Subsequently, textual authority rests increasingly in the reader’s own interpretative selection. The note’s overdetermination of meaning attempts to fix meaning withinan elusive text and yet constitutes a second text productive of its own independent meaning that also functions in juxtaposition to its primary textual counterpart. Between the central and marginal texts, a dialogue transpires, which in conjunction with other footnotes and passages, produces a cacophony of voices from which the reader may determine the most appropriate understanding. While the commentary attempts to eradicate ambiguity with a clear and certain reading, what emerges is a critical debate with more than a slight semblance of democracy.

In their different ways, the Geneva and King James bibles each attempt to govern both the text and the reader. Through their respective approaches to marginal annotation they each aim to produce specific relationships between text and reader. While the Geneva annotations aim for a clarified text which the reader can come to know and understand, the KJV endeavors to produce a text whose mystery the reader will both revere and submit to. First John 2:20-22 reads, “But ye have an unction from the holy One, and ye know all things. I have not written onto to you, because yee know not the truth: but because ye know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a lier, but hee that denieth that Jesus is the Christ: hee is Antichrist, that denyeth the Father, and the Sonne” (KJV 1 John 2:20-22). John addresses his reader as one already with the grace of God who is therefore already imbued with an intuitive sense of all things true. Where one knows the single truth of Christ, one also knows all truths. In this way, knowledge, truth and, oneness are equivalencies. John writes not of truth but to warn against the disruption of unity. As the Father cannot be separated from the Son nor Christ as man from Christ as Spirit, a liar becomes one who disrupts unity or produces difference. The Geneva notes, “He that taketh away or diminisheth ether of the natures in Christ or he that confoundeth or separateth them els he that putteth not difference betwene the persone of the Sonne […] denieth Christ to be Messias” (Geneva 1 John 2:22). Where the note’s content admonishes the diminishing, confounding, or splitting of Christ’s singularity, the note performs these actions upon the text on a structural level. The note separates the material of the text from its meaning. It interferes in the reader’s relationship with the text. It disrupts the meditative experience and confounds the sense of the text. As it does, the note enables the reader’s involvement in the production of meaning. William H. Sherman writes, “instead of leaving these mysteries to the mediation of a carefully directed priesthood—these notes served to advance one doctrinal position over others and even gave some interpretative license to the reader” (Sherman 126). In this way, the employment or refusal of annotation in the Geneva and King James versions demonstrates two fundamentally different intentions for the text.

While early English bibles sought to manage textual uncertainty with marginal annotation, the KJV employs scriptural ambiguity as a means to promote readerly faith and submission to the text. This faith and submission extends itself both to James and God. Despite their intended purpose, the marginal notes in these earlier bibles contributed both to further scriptural indeterminacy and an enabling reader agency. The KJV, like its predecessors, intends its textual authority not to be disturbed. However, unlike those bibles, the KJV proffers the reader’s own textual doubt as scriptural mystery. In this way, ambiguity comes to remind the reader of his station beneath both God and the King. The KJV “Preface” reads,

Now in such a case, doeth not a margine do well to admonish the Reader to seek further, and not to conclude or dogmatize upon this or that peremptorily? For as it is a fault of incredulitie, to doubt of those things that are evident: so to determine of such things as the Spirit of God hath left (even in the judgment of the judicious) questionable, can be no lesse then presumption. (Opfell 159)

Readerly submission is privileged over textual certainty. The blank margins of the KJV rebuke the reader and the presumption of their request for clarification upon God’s text. Where the sense of the text is in doubt, it is meant to “stir up our devotion to crave the assistance of Gods spirit by prayer” (159). The reader must either search elsewhere in the text for clarification or appeal to God through prayer. In this way, the meditative experience of the text is maintained and an appeal to authority is introduced. The “Preface” and the lack of annotation remind the reader that the world is not theirs to understand and demands that they submit to their station within the great chain of being. As the reader concedes the scriptural mystery, they also submit to the command of both God and King. In this way, the KJV uses the reader’s scriptural uncertainty to reinforce James’s absolutism.

If the proliferation of marginal notes in the Geneva Bible disseminates meaning, dispersing and disseminating textual and political authority, the removal of marginal notes in the King James Version constitutes a consolidation of meaning. Adam Nicholson writes, “The bible was to become a part of the new royal ideology” (Nicholson 66). If there was to be no separation of King, land, state, and Church, then there was no longer any division between King and text. Rather writes,

James did not deny that the Bible was the word of God, but he did recognize that the way that word was interpreted, translated, and commented upon had bearing on his rule and the very notion of monarchy and the authority of the state. It is almost impossible to support the argument that James, a ruler that would claim godhood under God, could commission a translation of the Bible without that belief somehow seeping into the text. (Rather 6)

The King James Version presents itself as James intended his rule. It intends to stand alone—absolute with no need of commentary to elucidate, interpret, support, exemplify, or draw out its meaning or will. It is a statement of utmost confidence. Its “Preface” reads,

Great and manifold were the blessings, most dread Sovereign, which Almighty God, the Father of all mercies, bestowed upon us the people of England, when first he sent your Majesty’s Royal Person to rule and reign over us. For whereas it was the expectation of many, who wished not well unto our Sion, that... some thick and palpable clouds of darkness would so have overshadowed this Land, that men should have been in doubt which way they were to walk, and that it should hardly be known, who was to direct the unsettled State; the appearance of Your Majesty, as of the Sun in his strength, instantly dispelled those supposed and surmised mists... (Opfell 141)

James’s presence is ubiquitous. As “that sanctified person . . . under God” (Opfell 141), he is the messianic bringer of light, a son of suns illuminating a new English Zion and delivering order, both to the “unsettled State” and to the private lives of his formally darkened nation. As his governance clears the mist of a mired nation, so too does James dispel the miasma of text. In a text which silences commentary—commentary inextricably linked with religious and political dissent—James’s rule as an absolutist is inseparable from the work his translators produce. Indicative of his absolutist project, his translators elsewhere present him as author, patron, reader, and critic of the text. To the text, he is all things. His role as “King and Sovereign” is equal to his role as “principal Mover and Author of the work,” (142). As James is author, he is king.

If through the KJV James felt a need to demonstrate his absolute rule with an absolute text, he also expresses a deficient grasp of that absolutism. The silence at the page’s edge only calls attention to the expulsion of the voices which once occupied that space. Sleights states, “By James I’s measure, the Geneva glosses far exceeded permissible limits, going so far at one point as to condone rebellion against a lawful king” (Sleights 265). The gloss performs this action on a structural level. It is no surprise, then, that James attempts to absolve the Bible of difference. Jason Peters writes, “From the beginning the new Bible was to be part of a larger policy directed towards mediating between opposing religious factions” (Peters 71). In the moment that England declared its imperial strength, as its ruler claimed “Godhood under God” (Rather 6), aiming at a unification of Scotland and England, England was in a fragile state, divided amongst various extremist and moderate Protestant sects, Anglican purists, Protestant-leaning Anglicans and Anglicans seeking Catholic reconciliation. The presentation of confidence and absoluteness in the KJV can, therefore, be read as an anxiety-ridden desire for stability.

Without annotation and as a project of consolidating meaning, the authorized version functions as narrative of power and text. For this reason, the King James Version is also a version of King James. This is to say that it is a fiction and thus can be read as a narrative of James, the authorized version—an expression of the anxieties of power, a manifestation of the gap between rule and its expression.

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