

Title: Early Stuart Polemical Hermeneutics: Andrew Willet's 1611 Romans Hexapla

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ABSTRACT

Andrew Willet, a Cambridge-educated minister, began his writing career as a popular anti-Catholic polemicist (best known for the influential *Synopsis Papismi*) during Elizabeth I's reign. Early in the seventeenth century he shifted genres, writing a series of biblical commentaries using a distinctive six-fold method and earning a reputation as one of the country's best textual scholars. Willet suggested that the change to exegesis was a move from religious controversy to more irenic waters, and many scholars have taken him at his word, writing of his abandonment of polemics. An analysis of his 1611 hexapla commentary on Romans, however, reveals a distinct polemical lens, indicating that he did not so much abandon religious controversy as transfer it to a different genre. Interpreting Romans using this polemical hermeneutic served to sharpen Willet's distinctions and clarify his presentation of Reformed doctrine against a negative Roman Catholic relief. While many English Protestants of his day similarly read Scripture through an anti-Catholic framework, Willet's background in polemics, his textual skill, and his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of exegesis set him apart as an exemplar of this interpretive approach to the biblical text.

Contrary to some depictions of early Stuart anti-Catholicism as being primarily politically motivated, Willet's appears firmly rooted in a doctrinal concern to magnify God's grace and eliminate all suggestion of human merit in salvation. This exegetically derived concern, combined with his set of finely-honed humanist and scholastic interpretive tools, ensured that his hermeneutic does not impose alien concepts upon the text. His hermeneutic, rather, focuses his exposition and guides his collation of different scriptures, providing a structure for eliciting the epistle's central lessons. Additionally, we see how polemical context shapes the formulation of doctrine. Willet's Reformed theology is similar to that of the continental Reformed, but different responses are required to the different challenges posed in each setting.

This study of Willet's Romans hexapla focuses on his criticism of the Vulgate, grammatical and rhetorical analysis, causality-based arguments, and appropriation of ancient heretics and Church Fathers, showing how these serve to sharpen his interpretation and support his aim of presenting Protestantism as the true and "catholic" church.