

The significance of the Geneva Bible

Julian Templeton 28th October 2012

United Reformed Church, Highgate

Psalm 103 Romans 8:14-39

Last year, much was made of the 400th anniversary of the publishing of the so-called King James Bible in 1611. Books were written praising the influence it has had on the English language and English-speaking cultures. The Education Secretary, Michael Gove, arranged for a free copy of the King James Bible to be issued to every school. Quite what schoolchildren will make of its 400 year-old language is anyone's guess, but if they can cope with the even older and more complex language of Shakespeare, then perhaps the simpler language of the King James Bible will not be beyond their reach. What may have not been apparent in these celebrations of the King James Bible are the reasons why this version was commissioned in the first place. It was the by-product of James I's main intention to unite warring Puritans and Traditionalists in the Church of England. James I realised that rather than having Puritans and Traditionalists vying for power, it would be a useful diversion to get them working together on a new version of the Bible. So he and his Archbishop deliberately composed the editorial committees with representatives of both factions. The other reason for commissioning a new version of the Bible was that both James I and the traditionalist Bishops of the Church of England wanted to supplant a previous version of the Bible that had been a runaway publishing success. This was the Geneva Bible. Those in power did not like the Geneva Bible because of its marginal explanatory notes, some of which were a direct challenge to those who abuse power. The Bible that King James commissioned was to have no such notes or commentary. But how did a Bible produced in Geneva come to be so popular and so challenging in the English-speaking world?

To answer that question, we need to go a little further back in history. Prior to the printing of Luther's German Bible in 1534, most Christians never had a Bible of their own to read. Only clergy and Latin scholars had access to the Scriptures in Latin. In England it became, by royal edict, a capital crime even to read the Bible in English. John Wycliffe and his followers, known as Lollards, secretly distributed and read parts of the Bible translated into English, but they did this by the laborious process of writing and copying by hand. This situation was to change radically when, in 1440, Johannes Gutenberg perfected the printing press with moveable type. In 1526, the English scholar William Tyndale attempted to translate the Bible into English and was forced to flee to Germany, where he met Martin Luther, and then to Belgium, all in an effort to translate the Bible and to fulfill a promise he once made to a clergyman:

if God spare my life, ere many years pass I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of Scripture than thou dost.

Fulfilling his promise, Tyndale published the first ever mechanically printed New Testament in the English language in 1526. Six thousand copies were smuggled from Belgium to England. But Tyndale was hunted, captured, and imprisoned in the Belgian town of Vilvoorde. On March 6, 1536, he was strangled and burned at the stake. Tyndale's monumental work made its way to some English pulpits. These first English passages of Scripture, however, were pulpit Bibles, for use by the clergy; still most of the people had no Bibles they could afford. In 1553 Mary Tudor ascended the throne, married the Catholic King of Spain, and set about stamping-out the Reformation. Determined to force the English people back to Roman Catholicism, she ordered the burning of all copies of the Bible in English. She caused more than 300 reformers, pastors and Bible translators to be burned at the stake. Queen Mary's crusade drove approximately 800 English scholars to the Continent. Some of these gathered in Geneva via a dispute at an exiled congregation in Frankfurt. They were just some of the diaspora of mostly English Protestant leaders and their families who fled to in Switzerland, Germany, Holland, and Italy to form small expatriate communities. Many of the places where they settled—Strasbourg, Zurich, Frankfurt, Basel, and Emden—became centres for the printing and distributing of Protestants tracts and propaganda that would be smuggled back into England. Geneva was one such centre that had already become a hub of Reformed Protestantism under John Calvin and a centre for biblical scholarship. Geneva in the 1550's produced in excess of 20 editions of the New and Old Testaments and complete Bibles in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish.

A small group of English-speaking scholars based in Geneva, led by William Whittingham, decided that they should provide a new translation of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into English. Whittingham was Calvin's brother-in-law and completely revised William Tyndale's New Testament, adding annotations and commentaries, and published it in 1557. Almost immediately he and a small group of scholars including Miles Coverdale¹, Christopher Goodman, Anthony Gilby, John Knox, and Thomas Sampson, began translation of Old Testament. Devoting more than two years of intense toil to the task, the result was the first Bible translation produced by a committee rather than by one individual. The completed Geneva Bible was published in 1560 and dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, who had succeeded her half-sister to the throne and, at least for political reasons, supported a definitive break with the Church of Rome. The Geneva Bible divided the text into numbered verses for ease of reference: the first English Bible to do so. It contained an introduction to each book of the bible, entitled the 'argument'. It used italics to indicate which words were added

¹ Coverdale was the main translator of the Old Testament and Apocrypha (from the Latin *Vulgate*) of the *Great Bible*, 1539, and his translation of the Psalms was included in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

to satisfy English idiom, and even signalled variant Greek readings with footnotes. Some maps of biblical lands were provided, and some woodcut illustrations produced to add interest and understanding. The print of the Geneva Bible was in readable Roman font rather than heavy Gothic. The most popular editions were pocket-sized and thus portable, unlike the much larger lectern-size of other Bibles. Most importantly, they were affordable for a much larger number of people. Later editions contained Reformed catechisms to instruct people in the Christian faith, and some others had Metrical Psalms for singing (such the Sternhold and Hopkins paraphrase that we sang earlier). But perhaps most importantly of all, the Geneva Bible did not automatically assume that people would understand the poetry, prose and narrative of the Scriptures, so scholars provided explanatory notes to help the reader.

Earlier we heard two readings from the Geneva Bible. The second of these was from Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 8. I want you to imagine that you are a 16th century Christian listening to these words for the first time:

14 ¹For as many as are led by the Spirit of God,
they are the sons of God.
15 ¹For ye have not received the ²Spirit of bondage,
to ³fear again: but ye have received the Spirit of
⁴adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.
16 The same Spirit beareth witness with our spirit,
that we are the children of God.
17 ¹If *we be* children, *we are* also ²heirs, even the
heirs of God, and heirs annexed with Christ: ³if
so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be
glorified with him.
18 ¹For I ²count that the afflictions of this present
time *are* not worthy of the glory, which shall be
showed unto us.
19 ¹For the fervent desire of the ²creature waiteth
when the sons of God shall be revealed,
20 Because the creature is subject to ¹vanity, not
of its ²own will, but by reason ³of him, which hath
subdued it under ⁴hope,
21 Because the creature also shall be delivered
from the ¹bondage of corruption into the glorious
liberty of the sons of God.
22 For we know that every creature groaneth with
us also, and ¹travaileth in pain together unto this
present.
23 ¹And not only *the creature*, but we also which
have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we do sigh
in ²ourselves, waiting for the adoption, *even* ³*at*
redemption of our body.

Now, allowing for the fact that this language, which sounds archaic to us, would have sounded strikingly contemporary to 16th century English-speakers; how might those who heard it for the first time have understood it? The extract from Romans 8 is part of a much longer argument, which, even in a modern translation, is not always easy to follow. Listen, then, to the marginal notes from the Geneva Bible, the language of which I have modernized:

Paul teaches the way the sons of God come to that blessed state, by the cross, as Christ himself did: and by this way opens to them fountains of comfort:

1. We have in Christ a companion and fellow of our afflictions.
2. We shall be also his followers in that everlasting glory.
3. This glory, which we look for, does a thousand times surmount the misery of our afflictions.
4. He plainly teaches us that we shall certainly be renewed from that confusion and horrible deformation of the whole world, which cannot be continual, as it was not at the beginning: But as it had a beginning by the sin of humanity, for whom it was made by the command of God, so shall it at last be restored with the elect.
5. If the rest of the world looks for a restoring, groaning for it, and not in vain, let it not grieve us also to sigh, yes, let us be more certainly persuaded of our redemption to come, forasmuch as we have the first fruits of the Spirit.
6. Hope is necessarily joined with faith: seeing then that we believe those things, which we are not yet in possession of, and hope does not regard the thing that is present, we must therefore hope and patiently wait for that which we believe shall come to pass.

It was marginal notes of explanation such as these that would make the Geneva Bible so universally popular with the ordinary people because it gave them the tools to understand the message of the Bible. Indeed, we can say without exaggeration that the Geneva Bible was the first Study Bible.

However, those in positions of power regarded these same marginal notes as dangerous. For example, in the story from Exodus 1 about the Hebrew midwives disobeying Pharaoh's order to kill all male babies, the marginal note states: "Their disobedience herein was lawful." Of Jehu's murder of Queen Jezebel in 2 Kings 9, the note states that Jehu did this "by the motion of the Spirit of God" and that Jezebel's death was an "example of God's judgments to all tyrants." It was because of notes like these that those with political power regarded the Geneva Bible as dangerous and seditious. Yet with the vast majority of the people, the Geneva Bible was a runaway publishing success. Between 1560, when it was first published, and 1611, the year the King James Bible was published, the Geneva Bible was published in 120 different editions. It was the Geneva Bible that was used by Shakespeare, Milton, Knox, Donne and Bunyan. It was the Bible favoured by the Plymouth and Virginia settlers in North America. Cromwell authorized the Soldier's Pocket Bible to be issued to his troops with extracts from the Geneva Bible.

The demise of the popularity of the Geneva Bible was in large part to do with royal and ecclesiastical censure that banned its printing and made its possession incur a heavy fine. In the library of Westminster College, Cambridge, there is a copy of a pocket-sized Geneva Bible that was found hidden in the wall of a house in Scotland. It was due to pressure like this the King James Bible supplanted the Geneva Bible, for the former became, by default, the only *Authorised Version*²: hence the name by which it is still widely known in the UK. But those of us who trace our

² The irony is that the 1611 Bible was never authorised by the Church of England. A predecessor version, the *Great Bible*, 1539, was authorised by Henry VIII to be read aloud in the worship of the Church of England. It's large size and cost precluded most people from gaining access to it. Indeed, it was often chained to the pulpit. The *Bishops' Bible*, 1568, supplanted the *Great Bible*. The *Bishops' Bible*, also authorised to be read in the worship of the Church of England as a rival to the popular *Geneva Bible*, was never popular for use in the home. The 1611 'King James Bible' then supplanted both the Great and Bishops' Bibles by default, since no more editions of the latter were printed.

spiritual lineage to Puritan and Reformed roots should be prompted to ask: authorised by whom and for what purpose? There is no doubt that for those who had vested interests in maintaining political power and privilege, the Authorised Version was safer; the Geneva Bible, more politically risky and subversive. When the Geneva Bible disappeared, there were widespread complaints that people “could not see into the sense of Scripture for lack of the spectacles of those Genevan annotations.” There were also complaints that people could not understand the new “Bible without notes” due to its already archaic-sounding language. The King James Bible has been called the first ‘mock Tudor’ bible. Indeed, Hugh Broughton, the most highly regarded English Hebraist of his time, issued in 1611 a total condemnation of the new version, criticizing especially the translators' rejection of word-for-word equivalence and stated that, "he would rather be torn in pieces by wild horses than that this abominable translation should ever be foisted upon the English people". But what had been imposed could not stamp out what the Geneva Bible had introduced: providing the tools so people could understand the message of the biblical writers with all its political and social implications; a clear statement of the gospel message and the Christian faith; metrical psalms for worship and sample prayers to be prayed at home. All subsequent bibles, directories for worship, prayer books, and commentaries bear the indelible mark of the Geneva Bible's influence. It is an especially Reformed emphasis that ‘throughout our life it is God with whom we have to deal. Knowing this, we will plan only those things that comply with God's will and are rooted in it. We will look to God in all we do,’ (Calvin). For Reformed Christians, the Scriptures are the source of God's will and purpose. It seems appropriate, then, to end with a prayer included with the Geneva Bible, 1599:

O Gracious God and most merciful Father, which hast vouchsafed us the rich and precious jewel of thy holy word, assist us with thy spirit, that it may be written in our hearts to our everlasting comfort, to reform us, to renew us according to thine own Image, to build us up, and edify us into the perfect building of thy Christ, sanctifying and increasing in us all heavenly virtues. Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

In the production of the sermon, I have drawn upon the following sources:

“The History and Impact of the Geneva Bible” by Marshall Foster, *1599 Geneva Bible*, (White Hall: Tolle Lege Press, 2006-2010)

“Introduction to the Facsimile Edition” of *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007)

“Translating the Bible for King James” by Gordon Campbell; “The Geneva Bible” by Nick Spencer, both in *The Bible in Transmission*, Summer/Autumn 2011, Bible Society, Swindon

“Geneva Bible” entry in Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_Bible

“King James Bible” entry in Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authorized_King_James_Version

Illustration of the Exodus from the Title Page of the *Geneva Bible*, 1560

