

The King James Bible and the Geneva Bible: a Comparison

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Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God, Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,”

This text is a word of hope and promise to both the Jewish exiles in Babylon, and to those left behind in Jerusalem: their period of exile will come to an end, God will prepare a way for them to be reunited in Jerusalem. Nothing will stand in the way of God's purpose: the very terrain itself will be levelled and straightened to ease the journey of the exiles back to Jerusalem. The evangelist, Mark, makes reference to this same text when conveying the purpose of the ministry of John the Baptist: he will prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah by preparing the hearts and minds of the people for Jesus's coming. This John did by the wholly new practice of asking the Jews to be baptised as an indication that they had repented of their sins. We can only speculate how differently Jesus might have been received had not John the Baptist prepared the way for him.

Similarly, we can only speculate whether the King James Bible might have been very different—or might not have been at all—had not its way been prepared by other English translations such as those by John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, and the scholars who produced the Geneva Bible. 2011 marks the 400th anniversary of the production of the Bible at the instigation of King James I. Known as the King James Bible or the Authorised Version, it was first printed in 1611. All our readings today have come from this version.

I remember being taken by a friend to visit an elderly woman who was a Seventh Day Adventist in Invercargill, New Zealand, and her impressing upon me most insistently that the only proper translation of the Bible was the King James Version. Only in this translation, she argued, God had inspired 50 scholars to render a faithful translation of the Scriptures into English. All the other subsequent translations, she contended, were copyright, designed to make money, and therefore were not to be trusted!

Well, in one sense she was right, the Bible was, is, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be, the world's bestselling book. Many publishers have profited from their printing of Bibles. Indeed the history of printing in Europe is inextricably linked with new editions of the Bible. King James did not have profit at the forefront of his mind when he commissioned a new version of the Bible at the Hampton Court Conference of 1604; rather, a new version of the Bible was by-product of his real intention: to unite warring Puritans and Traditionalists in the Church of England. John Rainolds, President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, proposed that ‘there be a new

translation of the Bible because those that were allowed in the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI were corrupt and not answerable to the truth of the original.’ In fact the version that was produced was a revision, not a fresh translation. It was a revision of the Bishops’ Bible: ‘to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.’ The other translation from which the revisers drew heavily was the Geneva Bible, itself heavily indebted to William Tyndale’s earlier translation. The Geneva Bible was the single greatest influence on the King James Version, with approximately 20% of its text commandeered unaltered. However, both James I and the Bishops of the Church of England did not like the Geneva Bible, not only because of its translation of contentious terms such as ‘minister’ instead of ‘priest’, but also because of its marginal notes that were regarded as anti-episcopal and anti-monarchical. The Bible that King James commissioned was to have no such notes and was to avoid such contentious terms.

I think God probably did inspire those scholars who produced the Bible that has become known as the King James Version. And if God did, it was not necessarily because they were the purest of instruments, for some of these scholars led colourful lives. John Layfield had fought the Spanish in Puerto Rico; Richard Thomson was a brilliant Latinist but also an alcoholic; the Dean of St Paul’s, John Overall, was said to prefer speaking Latin to English, but had the misfortune to be cuckolded. His wife deserted him for the courtier, Sir John Selby, inspiring the verse that did the rounds in London:

*The Dean of St Paul’s did search for his wife,
and where d’ye think he found her?
Even upon Sir John Selby’s bed,
as flat as any flounder.*

There were six subcommittees that undertook the revision: two in Westminster, two in Oxford, and two in Cambridge. Once the six subcommittees had completed their revision, it went to an editorial committee based at Stationers’ Hall in London. The revised version would be read aloud until one of the editorial committee had a suggestion or objection, then the discussion would generally proceed in Latin, the principal scholarly language, and sometimes in Greek. The committee would agree the revision, and then the reader would read on until stopped again. The result was a version that is good to listen to, and that produced memorable phrases that have entered the mainstream of the English language. Phrases such as: “Know for a certainty”; “The root of the matter”; and “To every thing there is a season”. There are other phrases that the King James Bible borrowed from Tyndale and the Geneva Bible and popularized, phrases such as: “From time to time”; “Fell flat on his face”; and “Pour out your heart”.

Whereas the origin, process, and scholars who produced the King James Bible are reasonably well documented; those that produced the Geneva Bible are less so. We know fairly reliably that the British Scholars who gathered in Geneva were refugees from Queen Mary’s

Catholic regime who came via a dispute at an exiled congregation in Frankfurt. They were just some of the diaspora of mostly English Protestant leaders and their families in Switzerland, Germany, Holland, and Italy who fled from persecution 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 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 group of no more than 15 English-speaking scholars led by William Whittingham decided that they should provide a new translation of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into English. The reason they did so is recorded in the introduction to the first edition of the Geneva Bible, 1560:

It behoves Christians to walk in the fear and love of God, and this is best done when one has knowledge of the Word of God. We thought that we could bestow our labour and study in nothing which could be more acceptable to God and comfortable to his church than in the translating of the holy Scriptures into our native tongue...

Unlike the later King James Bible, the Geneva Bible was no mere revision, but was a new translation of the Scriptures. That they completed this in just over two years is remarkable. And when we consider that, unlike the King James Bible, they provided a fresh translation of the text and also added marginal notes for explanation, the achievement is more remarkable still. 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 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, unlike the much larger lectern-size of other Bibles, and, most importantly, they were affordable. Later editions contained Reformed catechisms to instruct people in the Christian faith, and some others had Metrical Psalms for singing. 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 it provided explanatory notes to help the reader.

It was the marginal notes of explanation that would make the Geneva Bible so universally popular with the ordinary people, as well as making it so disliked by those in positions of power. For example, in the story from Exodus 1 about the Hebrew midwives disobeying Pharaoh's order to kill all male babies, the 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 the Geneva Bible was regarded by those with political power and 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. With so many editions being printed, and some in haste, the proofreading was not always flawless. An edition printed in 1631 contained a typographical error for the word 'Greatnesse' and rendered Deuteronomy 5:24 as "And ye said, Behold, the Lord our God hath shewed us his glory and his great asse." The same edition also left out the crucial negative when rendering the 7th commandment, with the result that it read: "Thou shalt commit adultery." These occasional typos notwithstanding, 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 pressure that banned its printing and made its possession incur a heavy fine. This was why the Geneva Bible was supplanted by the King James Bible, for the latter was the only *Authorised Version*: hence the name by which it is still known. But those of us who trace our spiritual lineage to Puritan and Reformed roots should be prompted to ask this: authorised by whom and for what purpose? There is no doubt that for those who had vested interests in maintaining their political power and privilege, the Authorised Version was safer; the Geneva Bible, more politically risky and subversive. Yet, in the light of our two bible readings today, we might well ask whether the Geneva Bible, as forerunner, was more faithful to the revolutionary message of God's saving and liberating love than the King James Bible for which it prepared the way? Perhaps, then, it is appropriate that the Geneva Bible should have the last word, Isaiah 40:10,

Behold, the Lord God will come with a strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold his reward is with him, and his work before him.

Upon this, a marginal note comments: "[God's] power will be sufficient without help of any other, and will have all means in himself to bring his will to pass." In our age of anxiety and financial austerity, we can draw inspiration from this confidence in God's power and trust in his will.

Amen.

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

"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

"The Bible of King James" by Adam Nicholson, pp. 36-61, in *National Geographic*, December 2011

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