

Whittingham, who settled in Frankfurt in 1554, wrote a letter with some other people to the other English refugee communities in the German and Swiss cities in order to persuade them to reform themselves and to be thankful for the privilege of living and worshipping as the true Church. The tenor and phrasing of this letter led to a long debate between the group at Frankfurt which was led by Whittingham, and the leaders of the other English congregations. As the controversy went on, the order of service became the central point of contention: some of the Frankfurt church rejected parts of the English Book of Common Prayer and wanted to follow the Genevan liturgy. In the end, many (including William Williams, William Whittingham, Anthony Gilby, Christopher Goodman, Thomas Cole, John Foxe, and William Kethe) left Frankfurt for Geneva over this issue and some of these men were the ones who worked on the Geneva Bible. To put it differently, those who were able to participate in the Bible project and were interested in it ended up in Geneva, and this is one of the reasons why the Geneva Bible originated in this city.

The second reason is related to the city of Geneva itself. In the 1550s, Geneva was well-known for biblical scholarship. For example, it was Geneva where Robert Estienne (otherwise known as Stephanus) produced his Greek New Testament (1551) which versified the text for the first time in history. Theodore Beza's Greek New Testament was of course published in Geneva as well.

Moreover, Genevan inhabitants translated the Bible into French, Spanish, and Italian during this period. In this



“La Noble Ville de Geneve avec sa Situation” (1552)

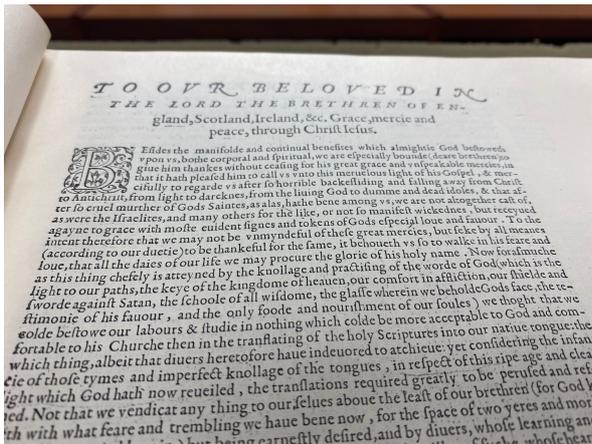
sense, it is no wonder that the English refugees in Geneva conceived the idea of translating the Bible into their own mother tongue.

Motivation according to the Team-Members' Words

What is as fascinating as historical context is to read what the translators and contributors to the Geneva Bible themselves said regarding its production. We are able to glimpse their own motivations in their letter to their brothers and sisters in Christ in their homeland (as well as to correspondents in Scotland and Ireland).

In this letter, the producers of the Geneva Bible wrote that, having been wonderfully blessed by God corporally and spiritually, they considered it Christians' duty to express their gratitude. For them, the best way to be thankful to the Lord was to “walk in his fear and love, that all the days of our life we may procure the glory of his holy name.” But how could this walk that is worthy of the gospel be made possible? Their answer was “by the knowledge and practicing of

the word of God.” This is precisely why they thought that they would please God most by using their labors and study in translating the Holy Scriptures into their



“To our beloved in the Lord ... ”

native tongue. In short, they believed that the Bible in English would help English-speaking believers to live according to the right will of God, and therefore they dedicated themselves to this project with “fear and trembling” for more than two years, working day and night.

Based on this letter, we are able to discern their threefold justification for the Geneva Bible. They firmly believed in God’s unspeakable grace and infinite mercies toward undeserving people like

themselves. Because of this amazing and special love and favor of God, they thought it absolutely necessary for the recipients of this divine gift to express their gratitude with their lives. In order to live this life of gratefulness, it was mandatory for every believer to read the Bible firsthand, to know the truth in it, and live according to it.

Anonymous Translators and Contributors

Who then are “we” that wrote this letter? We would expect them to reveal their names at the end of the letter, but they remain silent about their identities, likely because there were many translators and the group’s membership shifted throughout the entire process.¹ Because we do not have a direct record regarding the editor-in-chief or a list of contributors, any remarks on the matter will be conjectural. That said, historians have always noted that it is likely that William Whittingham was the general editor, along with Miles Coverdale, Christopher Goodman, Anthony Gilby, Thomas Sampson, William Cole, John Knox, and William Williams as translators and commentators.

William Whittingham was a graduate of Oxford and expert in many languages including Hebrew and Greek. He was the minister who took over from John Knox in the English congregation of Geneva. He was the husband of John Calvin’s sister-in-law, Catherin Jaquemayne. Before he supposedly became the editor of the Geneva Bible, he translated the

WHITTINGHAM, WILLIAM (1524?–1579), dean of Durham, born at Chester about 1524, was son of William Whittingham, by his wife, a daughter of Haughton of Haughton (Hoghton) Tower, Lancashire, a county from which the Whittinghams originally came (*Visitation of Cheshire*, Harl. Soc. p. 248). In 1540, at the age of sixteen, he entered Brasenose College, Oxford, as a commoner, graduating B.A. and being elected fellow of All Souls’ in 1545. In 1547 he became senior student of Christ Church, commencing M.A. on 5 Feb. 1547–8, and on 17 May 1550 he was granted leave to travel

Entry on William Whittingham in the *Dictionary of National Biography*

¹ Brooke F. Westcott, *A General View of the History of the English Bible* (New York, 1927), 91.

entire New Testament into English in Geneva in 1557.

Another significant contributor was Christopher Goodman. He, too, graduated from Oxford and even became a professor of divinity there. He published a commentary on Amos, underscoring his expertise in the Old Testament studies and Hebrew. Furthermore, Anthony Gilby attended Cambridge and was known to be an intelligent classicist and specialist in Hebrew.² Few details are known about the other contributors' input.

Process: the Journey to the Geneva Bible

Although numerous exiled scholars of the time spent more than two years working day and night to produce the Geneva Bible, this English Bible was not simply their own work. In fact, it was the climax of the work of the English refugees that had been going on since 1556. There are two very important preliminary works that made the Geneva Bible possible.

The first book which laid the cornerstone for the Geneva Bible is the English New Testament which was published in Geneva in 1557. This book, which is often called the Geneva New Testament, was published in roman type instead of a gothic font, and had its verses divided into separate paragraphs. It also provided textual and expository notes. All these features reappeared in the Geneva Bible. Historians have often presumed that this work was primarily (if not independently) done by William Whittingham.

The second book that paved the way for the Geneva Bible was the Psalms in English which was also published in Geneva in 1557. It is likely that Anthony Gilby, who was the most able Hebraist among the English exiles in Geneva, was the translator and editor of this work as well.³

As the English congregation in Geneva pursued and achieved these two important projects, they grew in confidence in their expertise in biblical and textual scholarship. By making use of and building upon these two works (and also possibly by consulting works such as Coverdale's *Diglot*), they were able to embark on and complete the Geneva Bible.

Significant Features of the Geneva Bible

There are a number of unique features of the Geneva Bible which make it stand out among the Bibles of its time. It may even be suggested that it changed the

² The more detailed biographies of some of the contributors can be found in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

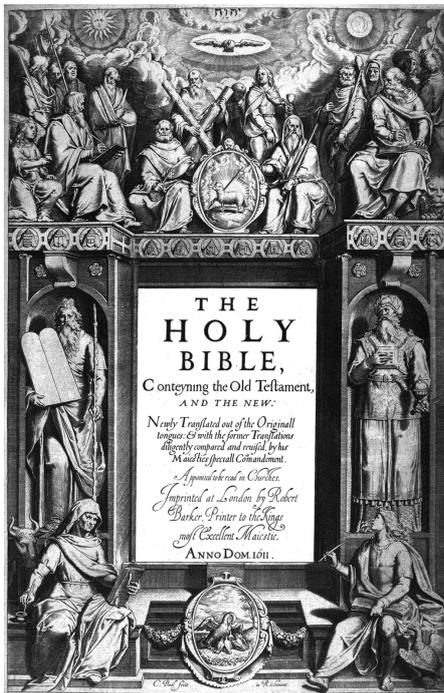
³ For more on this matter, see John David Alexander, "The Genevan Version of the English Bible" (DPhil diss., Oxford University, 1956), 59-82.

engravings, a dictionary of proper names in the Bible, an index (of important names, places, and events), and a chronological account of the biblical events were added for the readers' benefit as well.

The Popularity and Influence of the Geneva Bible

This uniquely and carefully created English Bible saw immediate success. English-speakers appreciated this work, which was accurately translated by scholars, with notes that were helpful for laypeople. Interestingly, the Bible gained popularity among pastors as well. Although the Great Bible (1539) was still the official Bible for church pulpits, even some bishops appreciated the value of the Geneva Bible.

Archbishop Parker and Bishop Richard Cox recognized the shortcomings of the Great Bible (possibly by comparing it with the Geneva Bible) and, under their leadership, the Anglican bishops brought out a new English translation. It was published in 1568 and was commonly called the Bishops' Bible. Although Parker outwardly advocated for a diversity of translations, his aim was to use his authority to prevent the Geneva Bible's official use by placing the Bishops' Bible in churches.



The King James Bible (1611)

Despite its opponents' efforts to undermine its popularity, the Geneva Bible continued to be the most sought-after Bible among the English-speaking population. As soon as Parker died in 1575, at least one new edition of this Bible was produced every year until 1618. Between 1560 and 1611, the Geneva Bible was issued in more than 120 editions, while the Bishops' Bible had twenty-two and the Great Bible only seven. The Geneva Bible retained its prominence even after the appearance of the KJV, producing over sixty editions despite the presence of a strong rival.

Popularity often comes with influence and that was the case for the Geneva Bible as well. First of all, it greatly impacted the subsequent English Bibles. Some would go so far as to suggest that the Geneva Bible is the most significant volume in the lineage of the KJV.⁵ Statistically speaking, out of the 61% of

material that the KJV borrows from earlier English Bibles, the Geneva Bible and Geneva New Testament make up 19%, while the Bishops' Bible (along with its subsequent versions) only 4%.

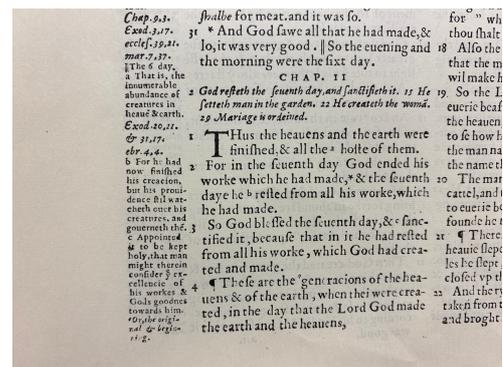
⁵ C. C. Butterworth, *The Literary Lineage of the King James Bible* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941), 163.

Moreover, we hear echoes of the influence of the Geneva Bible in the mouths of preachers of the time, too. Unsurprisingly, most of the Marian exiles and Puritans used it for their preaching. What is striking is the use of the Bible by many bishops; some used it more than the *Bishops' Bible*! Moreover, the Geneva Bible became so standard that English translations of Luther and Calvin's writings made use of it when quoting from Scripture.

Its influence, furthermore, was not limited to the church. We sense the cadences and wording of this Bible in Elizabethan and Jacobean poems and prose. Most importantly, it is most likely that Shakespeare was very familiar with the Genevan version, as he used specific phrases that are unique to the Geneva Bible.⁶

Theology of the Geneva Bible

As noted above, one of the features that made the Geneva Bible unique is its marginal notes. What is noteworthy is not just their presence, but their theology. Indeed, many of the comments are simply explanatory, providing definitions of words and offering alternative translations, but some have remarked that the notes as a whole present a distinctly Reformed tone. For instance, it is possible to see the emphasis on the sovereignty of God (Genesis 2:2; Job 1:6) and stress on the idea that worship is the chief duty of humanity (Psalm 145:4).⁷ Conversely, it seems equally feasible to say that the number of notes that are notably Reformed is not that high.⁸ Perhaps it would be safe to conclude that the notes have a Reformed tone but that it is not overly predominant. Nevertheless, it certainly seems that they were significant enough for King James to want to embark on a new Bible translation.



Notes on Genesis 2:2

The Bible of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower

⁶ Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 90-93.

⁷ David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 309-310.

⁸ Bruce Manning Metzger, "Geneva Bible of 1560," *Theology Today* 17:3 (1960): 348.



Robert W. Weir, "The Basics," 1843

What is striking about the Geneva Bible for our conference ("The Puritans and Their Impact") is that this was the Bible that the passengers on the Mayflower took to the New World. The Puritans cherished this Bible and continued to hold on to it in the Plymouth and Virginia settlements. It is likely that it was first brought to America into the Jamestown settlement in 1607. The secretary of the Virginia Company, William Strachey, used this version when he wrote the history of Virginia in

1609, and a leading minister called William Whitaker referred to the Geneva Bible in his sermons.

When the Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth in 1620 on the Mayflower, the Geneva Bible accompanied them. As a matter of fact, an analysis of the theological works and sermons that were published in the Plymouth settlement reveals that the Geneva Bible was the only Bible that was used in the colony to begin with.⁹

All told, the Geneva Bible proved to be profoundly influential for English Protestants, especially among those who yearned for further reformation of the English church. Indeed, the very popularity of this Bible translation was one of the main motivating factors that pushed the first of the Stuart monarchs in England to convene early seventeenth-century scholars to prepare a counterweight, namely the King James Bible.

⁹ For more details on this matter, see P. Marion Simms, *The Bible in America: Versions that Have Played Their Part in the Making of the Republic* (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1936), 75-79.