

The Geneva Bible

Substantially based on the earlier translations by William Tyndale, the Geneva Bible was the most successful, influential and widely read English translation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The English authorities, however, disliked the Geneva's militant phrases and seditious notes, and eventually it was replaced by the Authorised Version.



Nick Spencer

Nick Spencer is Research Director at Theos, the public theology think tank. This article is an extract from his latest book, *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible*, recently published by Hodder & Stoughton.

Size matters. Or, at least, it did in the Reformation.

During the 400th anniversary celebrations of the King James Version in 2011, a number of people pointed out that much of this much-praised translation was in fact the work of William Tyndale, who had died 75 years earlier. Nearly 90 per cent of the King James' New Testament, it has been calculated, comes from Tyndale's work, although the figure is rather less for the Old Testament, as Tyndale was executed before he could complete the translation that he had made his life's work.

Tyndale was a linguist and writer of unsurpassed skill and his bold, vivid, simple translation made the King James Version more readable than it might otherwise have been. There was, however, one aspect of Tyndale's work that was not adopted by the KJV translators, and deliberately so.

This was its format. Tyndale's New Testament was published in an octavo or pocket-sized edition, a deliberate and provocative decision. It made the volume easier to buy (then, as now, big books were more expensive than little ones, which themselves were far from cheap). It made it easier to read (as anyone who has ever tried to read the Bible on a commuter train will testify). And it made it easier to conceal (a serious consideration given that no sooner were they arriving in England than they were being banned and burned).

It may not be immediately clear that a consideration as apparently mundane as a book's size was a political issue, but it was. In the early 1530s, owning or reading an English Bible was deemed highly subversive and could send you to the stake. Small Bibles were

theological contraband and threatened to undermine the entire political order.

Henry VIII was no fan of the Lutheran movement, nor, at first, of English Bibles. However, a combination of need and opportunity led him to authorise a translation by the end of the decade that was intended to regulate and restrict the seemingly relentless flood of vernacular Bibles.

This authorised version, the Great Bible, was compiled by Miles Coverdale, who based much of the text on Tyndale's work. It was so-called because of its size (14 x 9 inches). Its frontispiece depicted society as it ought to be. An enthroned Henry dominated. Above him God was squeezed rather uncomfortably into a tiny heaven, from where he blessed the monarch. The king then passed the Word of God to Archbishop Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell, who in turn passed it to clergy and the laity respectively, the picture reaching all the way down to a few, bedraggled traitors, languishing in Newgate Prison for their refusal to honour the king.

Thomas Cromwell ordered a Great Bible to be set up in every parish church in the country, where the people might gather to read it – or, more accurately, to hear it being read. Archbishop Cranmer wrote in his preface to the second edition that Scripture would be available to 'all manner of persons, men, women, young, old, learned, unlearned, rich, poor, priests, laymen, Lords, Ladies, officers, tenants, and mean [poor] men, virgins, wives, widows, lawyers, merchants, artificers, husbandmen, and all manner of persons of what estate or condition so ever they be'. It was a thoroughly egalitarian sentiment, justified by the simple reason that 'it is convenient and

good [that] the scripture be read of all sorts and kinds of people, and in the vulgar tongue.'

Alas, the authorities soon judged it not to be convenient or good. As soon as ordinary people started reading the text, they started arguing about it, not only disagreeing with one another about what it meant but – worse – picking up on the fact that it has at least as much to say about personal freedom as it did about political order. Significantly, given that this was the first authorised translation in English history, none of the commoners on the frontispiece actually reads the Bible for themselves. Instead they all *hear* it.

Almost as soon as parishes were ordered to keep a Bible for the people to read, Henry started passing restrictions on Bible reading. A 1541 proclamation ordering the Great Bible to be placed in churches also commanded that 'lay subjects' should not 'presume to take upon them any common disputation, argument, or exposition of the mysteries therein contained'. It was a case of shutting the stable door several years too late. Two years later, the Act for the Advancement of True Religion forbade subjects 'of the lower sort' from reading it. The Bible was simply too dangerous a book to be handled by common folk. It may have been too late and too difficult now to remove the thousands of heavy editions that were chained in parish churches across the country, but the damage could at least be limited. The English Bible was tolerable, just so long as it was the big, authorised one established and controlled by the powers that be.

Or so they thought. The Reformers survived Henry's last, mercurial years in a state of mounting expectation, which appeared to be satisfied, when the young, evangelically minded and evangelically governed Edward ascended to the throne in 1547. It was not to last, and when his Catholic half-sister Mary succeeded him six years later, the English Protestant cause seemed doomed.

Leading reformers fled abroad, where they discussed the possible legitimacy of disobedience, a remarkable *volte face* for many. They wrote treatises on whether all political power was from God or whether superior orders ought always to be obeyed. Such publications were important but were dwarfed in their influence by the exiled reformers' most substantial work, now ubiquitously known as the Geneva Bible.

When the exiles left for the Continent in 1553, the English Bible was the Great Bible of 1539, large, authorised and authoritarian in intent. Four years later Geneva saw the publication of an English New Testament. Unattributed but probably translated by William Whittington, the Geneva New Testament was heavily dependent on Tyndale's work. It was a remarkable work that re-opened the political–textual tussle that the Great Bible had apparently closed two decades earlier.

The Geneva New Testament was pocket-sized, like Tyndale's. Unlike Tyndale's it was printed in readable Roman rather than heavy Gothic type. It was the first English Bible to divide chapters into numbered verses,

each of which it printed on a new line. It contained 'arguments' for every chapter of every book, used italics to indicate which words were added to satisfy English idiom, and even signalled variant Greek readings with footnotes.

Three years later, in 1560, a complete Bible was brought out from the same source. This maintained the style and innovations of the 1557 New Testament, but added maps, woodcut illustrations, tables of proper names, an index and a calculation of the period of time from the creation of the world to the current day, of huge importance to those energised by millenarian promises. It revolutionised the English Bible, and did so in a distinctly subversive way.

The Geneva Bible was to be the most influential English Bible of the next hundred years. Small and cheap (by contemporary standards), it was published to be owned, read and understood by anyone. It was, in effect, what Tyndale had been hoping for when he vowed to teach the ploughboy Scripture. It put into every person's hand the Word of God. Worse still, it helped them understand it.

The front cover spoke of liberation. Unlike the busy, authoritarian image on the front of the Great Bible, the dominant image of the Geneva Bible depicted a key moment from Exodus. The people of God have left Egypt and arrived at the Red Sea. They are surrounded by mountains, and the Egyptian Army is approaching fast. The situation looks hopeless but a pillar of cloud has appeared on the horizon and every reader knows what is about to happen.

In itself, this was not an immediate political threat. The very point of the Exodus was that it was God who rescued the Israelites, not they themselves, a point that was underlined by the two quotations that surrounded the picture: 'The Lord shall fight for you, therefore hold your peace' (Ex 14.14), and 'Great are the troubles of the righteous but the lord delivers them out of all' (Ps 34.19). The godly English faced great woes but they could be assured that God would deliver them.

Far more contentious was the way in which the translation helped readers to understand the text. The Geneva Bible came with notes. Its outer margins bore literally hundreds of comments of many varieties. Some gave variant translations, some cross-references, some definitions. Some identified quotations in the New Testament from pagan authors. Some were 'brief annotations upon all the hard places', based on the recognition that the Bible needed explanation.

Many of these points outlined the basic tenets of Reformed Protestant theology. Many others, however, particularly in the Old Testament, alighted on those political questions that sorely vexed Whittington's fellow exiles: when is it right to resist a tyrannous ruler and who may do so legitimately? Thus, commenting on the Hebrew midwives disobeying Pharaoh's order to kill all male babies in Exodus 1, the Geneva notes stated, 'Their disobedience herein was lawful, but their dissembling evil.' On God threatening to abandon Israel 'because of the sins of Jeroboam' in 1 Kings 14.16 the Geneva notes

remarked, 'The people shall not be excused, when they do evil at [the] commandment of their governors.' Of Jehu's murder of Jezebel in 2 Kings 9, the notes said that Jehu did this 'by the motion of the Spirit of God', and that Jezebel's death was an 'example of God's judgements to all tyrants'. In a note pertaining to Israel's worship of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32, the editors said that 'in revenging God's glory we must have no respect to person, but put off all carnal affection.' It was notes such as these, which amounted to leading theologians whispering about the legitimacy of political revolt in the ears of the masses, which were to provoke so much controversy over the next century.

The Geneva Bible was certainly not *just* a cover for political radicalism. Not only were contentious notes of this kind vastly outnumbered by the less politically contentious ones, but there were also other 'political' annotations that were more conservative. Indeed, the predominant advice regarding idolatrous tyrants was that the people should pray for forgiveness and await God's intervention. Thus, the note to Psalm 37.12 remarked, 'the godly are assured [that] the power and craft of the wicked shall not prevail against them, but fall on their own necks, and therefore ought patiently to abide God's time.'

There was, therefore, an ambiguity in the political notes that reflected the political ambiguity of the Bible as a whole. On the one hand, the editorial preface to Deuteronomy emphasised the divine origin of rulers. On the other, the notes to chapters 16 and 17 of that book take care to indicate that political power in Israel originally had an elective element, commenting on how Moses 'gave authority to that people for a time to choose them selves magistrates'. In the words of one scholar, 'the translators' faithfulness to the Bible's intrinsic indeterminacy generates a set of notes whose overall political message is irreducibly complex and undecidable ... [the] oscillation between recommending prayer, passive resistance and revolutionary action simply reflects oscillations and contradictions that are internal to the text of the Bible itself.'

If the Geneva Bible was not straightforwardly revolutionary, however, it was still dangerous. The fact that it put the Word of God into people's hands was bad enough. The fact that it did so in such a way as to make the text readable, engaging, relevant and comprehensible was worse. The fact that it unapologetically discussed the many occasions in the Old Testament (and it was the Old: the New proved much less politically contentious) in which the people or their leaders had legitimately resisted or even overthrown tyrants was worse still.

Ultimately, it was not so much its content that was revolutionary as the fact that its notes enabled readers to use the Bible to interpret contemporary events for themselves. 'By demonstrating how biblical texts could be applied generally – to any idolater or tyrant – the Geneva translators were training their readers as readers, empowering them to make the specific application to their own particular circumstances.'

Not surprisingly the authorities back in England, now under the (largely) reformed Elizabeth, disliked the translation. In the first decade of the new queen's reign, Matthew Parker, the Archbishop of Canterbury, launched, steered and completed a new translation. Working with 'mete', i.e. suitably orthodox scholars, most of whom were bishops, the new translation would update the now inadequate Great Bible of 1539, while avoiding the more militant phrases and notes of the Geneva version.

The resulting Bishops' Bible, printed in 1568, was a large and lavish volume. A portrait of the queen dominated its title page. The smaller quarto edition, published the following year, had a similarly regal image, showing the queen on her throne, surrounded and crowned by justice, mercy, fortitude and prudence, and above a small illustration of a minister in his pulpit preaching to a large, rapt congregation. The message was clear. The pendulum had shifted from its Genevan position and the Bible was once again understood as a bulwark of social order.

Geneva was not to be defeated, however. The Bishops' Bible went through 14 editions before Archbishop Parker's death in 1575 but his successor at Canterbury, Edmund Grindal, was better disposed towards the Geneva version and enabled its first English printing in 1576. Thereafter, it went through numerous new editions and became the dominant translation for the next half-century.

James I, who had a higher view of royal authority than his predecessor, disliked Geneva more than Elizabeth, and seized the opportunity presented to him by the Hampton Court conference of 1604 to sanction a new translation. The rest, as they say, is history. The resulting translation being bigger, heavier, more respectable, free of seditious notes, of any mention of the word 'tyrant' (a favourite of the Geneva exiles) and was graced, on its frontispiece, by an impenetrable carved stone wall.

Even now, though, the fight wasn't over. King James' version did not sweep all before it and the Geneva translation continued to sell well. Official weight was firmly behind the new translation, however, and domestic printing of the Geneva version was forced to end in 1616. Printing continued in the Netherlands, whence copies were imported, but both Charles I and his archbishop from 1633, William Laud, disliked the Geneva version intensely, and they successfully had it banned. The last edition was printed in 1644.

Although the 1640s witnessed the publication of a Soldier's Pocket Bible, which comprised extracts from the Geneva version, there was no turning away from the official edition during the Interregnum. The KJV was here to stay, its success finally secured with the Restoration of the monarchy and the Church of England in 1660. The battle for the English Bible, which had so influenced and been influenced by political life since the 1520s, was settled in favour of a large, heavy, official, 'authorised' version. In the textual tussle between freedom and order, order had won.