



The Pilgrim Press

FOUR EARLY BIBLES IN PILGRIM HALL

by Rev. Dr. Charles C. Forman

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Among the books in Pilgrim Hall are four Bibles of unusual interest. One belonged to Governor William Bradford, the Pilgrim Governor, and one to John Alden. These are among the very few objects existing today which we feel reasonably sure "came over in the Mayflower." Of the history of the two others we know little, but they are Geneva Bibles, the version most commonly used by the Pilgrims. John Alden's Bible, rather surprisingly, is the "King James" version authorized by the Church of England' but he also owned a Geneva Bible, which is now in the Dartmouth College Library. The four Bibles belonging to the Pilgrim Society have been carefully examined by the Rev. Dr. Charles C. Forman, pastor of the First Parish [Plymouth], who has contributed the following notes on the evolution of the Geneva Bible, its characteristics and historical importance. Miss Briggs is responsible for the notes on decorative details.

THE GENEVA BIBLE : THE BIBLE USED BY THE PILGRIMS

Nearly every Pilgrim household possessed a copy of the Bible, usually in the Geneva translation, which is sometimes called the "breeches" Bible because of the quaint translation of Genesis III:7, where it is said that Adam and Eve, realizing their nakedness, "sewed fig leaves together and made themselves breeches." The Geneva Bible occupies a proud place in the history of translations. In order to understand something of its character and significance we must recall earlier attempts at "englishing" the Scriptures.

With the introduction of Christianity into the British Isles in the seventh century, the Bible arrived with the missionaries, but since this Bible was in Latin it was available only to a handful of clerics. Although there were several paraphrases of the Biblical narratives in Anglo-Saxon, the first serious attempt to make the Bible available to English readers – or English hearers, for many could not read – was undertaken by John Wycliffe, who translated the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament from the Latin Vulgate. The translation was completed by Hereford, a close friend and pupil of Wycliffe. The whole version was revised and corrected in 1388. It was from such efforts at turning the Scriptures from the language of the universities into that of the common people that impetus was derived for the movements of church reform which led to the Reformation.

English Christians were to content themselves with the efforts of Wycliffe for nearly a century and a half, until William Tyndale set about the task of translation – this time working from the original Greek of the New Testament and the Hebrew of the Old Testament. Tyndale's version of the New Testament was published in 1525. We can realize something of the significance of these

movements to put the Bible into the hands of the common people when we recall the fear which beset officials of Church and State in the face of such activity. Because of a ban upon the publishing of the Bible in English, Tyndale was obliged to choose exile in order to see his effort realized. His New Testament was published in Worms. He then began to translate the Old Testament. Before his work was completed his identity was discovered, and in 1534 he was taken prisoner in Antwerp, incarcerated in a castle outside the city, and sentenced to death. He met his fate by strangulation and then burning. The date was October 6, 1536.

In spite of Tyndale's fate, the English Bible was destined for wide circulation. Even before Tyndale's execution Miles Coverdale had completed an English translation which was published in 1535, probably coming from a press in Zurich. It was the first English Bible to be published in its entirety. But like Wycliffe's Bible, it was "the translation of a translation." Coverdale used the work of Tyndale as far as that had gone; the rest was a translation of the German version of Martin Luther. So quickly had times changed, that the second edition, published in 1537, could be printed in Southwark, on the outskirts of London, and dedicated to Henry VIII. The "Matthew" Bible was also published in 1537, and the "Taverner" Bible in 1539. Both were re-workings of the Coverdale translation. In the same year the Great Bible, so-called from its striking size, was published. It was conceived by Archbishop Cramner, and edited by Coverdale himself. From the beginning the Great Bible enjoyed royal sanction, and thus was guaranteed by law a prominent place in every church in the land. It was the "authorized version" from 1539 until the appearance of the "Bishop's Bible" in 1568.

We have seen that William Tyndale alone worked from the original Greek and Hebrew texts. The Classics had been forgotten during the Middle Ages, and it was only with their rediscovery and the effect of the Renaissance on scholarship, coupled with unrest at abuses within the Church, that interest awakened in the biblical languages. At the time of Queen Mary's persecutions of the Protestants, English exiles sought refuge in various German cities and in the Low Countries. There they came in contact with men who had mastered Hebrew and Greek for the purpose of furthering biblical scholarship. Among the English exiles in Frankfort were three men of special interest to us; William Whittingham, Anthony Gilbey, and Thomas Sampson. All three left Frankfort for Geneva, where they played an important part in producing the Geneva Bible.

THE GENEVA BIBLE

William Whittingham published a translation of the New Testament which he made from the original Greek in 1557. In 1560 the Old Testament and a revision of Whittingham's New Testament was published as a result of the combined efforts of Whittingham, Gilbey, and Sampson. This was the famous Geneva Bible. Without question, it was the most significant English version from the standpoint of accuracy yet to appear.

This first edition was a quarto volume with pages measuring nine inches in length and six and one-quarter inches in width. The title page bore the following legend:

"The Bible and Holy Scriptures contained in the Old and New Testaments. translated according to the Ebrue and Greke, and conferred with the best translations in divers languages. With most profitable Annotations upon all the hard places, and other things of great importance..."

Below this was a woodcut depicting the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. Above the cut is this sentence: "Fear not, stand still, and behold the salvation of the Lord, which He will show to you this day." Reading up the left side are these words: "Great are the troubles of the righteous," and from the top to the bottom on the right side, "But the Lord delivered them out of all. Psa.xxiv.19."

Across the bottom of the cut are these words : "The Lord shall fight for you, therefore hold your peace. Exod.xiv.14." The woodcut reveals the intent of the scholar exiles : - to provide an English Bible for the use of their Protestant brethren in England to whom the sentiments expressed on the borders of the woodcut would be especially meaningful. The choice of the woodcut may also symbolize the deliverance of England from the bondage of Roman Catholicism under Mary, even though Protestant Queen Elizabeth looked with no fondness upon the Puritan and non-conforming elements within the English Church. At the bottom of the page appears the printer's imprint : "At Geneva. Printed by Rowland Hall, M.D.LX." On the back of the title page are "The Names and Order of all the Books of the Old and New Testaments, with the number of their chapters, and the leaf where they begin." Two points of interest are to be found in this Table of Contents. First, the Books of the Apocrypha are included, a custom non perpetuated in later editions. The Apocrypha was to suffer almost universal disuse among Protestants, though it did retain partial acceptance in the Church of England. In modern times it is being rediscovered, though it does not enjoy the same position as other books preserved in the Hebrew Bible. the other interesting detail is that the leaves, rather than the pages, are counted. later editions of the Geneva Bible numbered the pages rather than the leaves.

The Geneva Bible contains two Addresses which stand as prefaces, the first being addressed to the queen, to whom it was dedicated : "To the most virtuous and noble Queen Elizabeth Queen of England and France" from "Your humble servants of the English Church at Geneva." It continues with a downright statement of the contention of the exiles; that there are to be found within the English Church many enemies of the cause of true religion. They give their reason for publishing a new version of the Scriptures as follows :

"...we persuaded ourselves that there was no way so expedient and necessary for the preservation of the one (the Church of Christ) and the destruction of the other (the enemies) as to present to your Majesty the Holy Scriptures faithfully and plainly translated according to the languages wherein they were first written by the Holy Ghost..."

The Address concludes with the prayer that :

"This Lord of lords and King of kings, who hath even defended His, strengthen, comfort and preserve your Majesty, that you may be able to build up the ruins of God's house to His glory, the discharge of your conscience, and to the comfort of all them that love the coming of Christ Jesus our Lord. From Geneva, 10 April, 1560."

In the second Address, "to the Christian Reader," the translators set forth the principles which governed their work. They attempted an exact translation, as exact as knowledge of the original languages permitted :

"For God is our witness that we have by all means endeavoured to set forth the purity of the word and right sense of the Holy Ghost for the edifying of the bretheren in faith and charity."

They go on to state that they were more concerned with the integrity of the meaning of the text than with felicity of phrase. Like the apostles who preserved some of the vigor of the Hebrew idiom when addressing Gentiles in Greek, so the Geneva translators "Have in many places reserved the Hebrew phrasings," and in marginal notes provided the reader with acceptable

alternate renderings "which may also seem agreeable to the mind of the Holy Ghost and proper to our language."

THE FOUR BIBLES IN PILGRIM HALL

Governor Bradford's Bible is a Geneva Bible, though several of the check points are missing, due to its worn and battered condition. the Table of Contents lists the Apocrypha, but the actual books are no longer present, and may never have been included. The leaves rather than the pages are numbered. The early pages of this Bible, up to Genesis XII, are gone, but the title page of the New Testament gives the name of the printer and the date :
"Christopher Barker ... London ... 1592."

The decoration of this title page is not the usual Geneva design, which shows the Twelve Tribes of Israel for the Old Testament, balanced by the Twelve Apostles for the New. Instead there is a rich border topped with the Royal Arms, suitable to a secular book; nor is there anything biblical about the handsome boar's head tailpiece at "The end of the Prophets." Evidently the printer felt free to use whatever decorative cuts he had in stock. Certainly the tailpiece with dolphins appears both in Bradford's Geneva Bible and Alden's King James Bible; the tailpiece with male figures with swags of fruit appears in all our Geneva Bibles, and the tailpiece with winged female figures with garlands appears in Alden's King James Bible as well.

Bradford's Bible is printed in black letter, or "Old English," type, except for the marginal notes, conclusive evidence that the familiar statement that the Geneva Bible was always printed in Roman type is inaccurate.

No. 90 in the Pilgrim hall catalogue designates the Bible which once belonged to John Alden. Some of the leaves are missing, but the colophon at the end of Revelation shows that the New Testament was printed in London by Robert Barker, "Printer to the Kings most excellent Majestie," in 1620. The Concordance was printed by Bonham Norton and John Bill in 1619. This is not a Geneva Bible, but the "King James" or "Authorized" version. A Geneva Bible which also belonged to John Alden is in the possession of Dartmouth College. It is very similar to the Geneva Bible, No. 130, in Pilgrim Hall, and like ours, is printed in the Roman type usually used for the Geneva version.

Bible No. 130 is a Geneva Bible printed by Christopher Barker, London, in 1599. Roman type is used throughout; leaves rather than the pages are numbered; the Table of Contents lists the Books of the Apocrypha, but the books themselves are not included. an unusual point is that the new Testament is given in the rare version of L. Tomson. the New Testament is followed by "The Booke of Psalmes : Collected in English Meeter, by Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins, and others." This volume not only has the quaintly illustrated title-pages typical of the Geneva Bible, but is illustrated through in the most lively way. Evidently the reading of the Bible was intended to be a pleasure, as well as an act of piety.

The best preserved Geneva Bible in our collection is that bearing the number 130a. The entire book is intact, and considerable other material, such as services of Communion, Baptism, and Psalms for morning and evening prayer, are included. So is the popular rhymed version of the Psalms adapted for congregational singing by Sternhold and Hopkins. This was the version brought to New England by all the successive colonies except Plymouth, which used a version prepared for the exiled churches in Holland by Henry Ainsworth, "teacher" of the English congregation in Amsterdam. Pilgrim Hall has a copy of these Ainsworth Psalms, published in Amsterdam in 1612.

The Old Testament of No. 130a was published by Robert Barker in 1608; the New Testament in 1610. The leaves rather than the pages are numbered; the Apocrypha is included. The tooled leather binding is probably original. The whole volume, except the marginal notes, is in black letter, once more contradicting the statement that the Geneva Bible was always set in Roman type.

The Bibles in Pilgrim Hall show that different editions of the Geneva Bible varied considerably in detail; that the material bound together also varied, either by the owner's choice or the caprice of the bookseller; and that the firm of Barker in London printed both King James and Geneva Bibles, sometimes using the same decorative material for both.

IMPORTANCE OF THE GENEVA TRANSLATION

The importance of the Geneva Bible as evidenced by its popularity must be attributed to several features. One important innovation was the division of the text into verses as well as chapters. Another feature was the extensive commentary provided in the marginal notes. Of these notes the translators wrote that they had "omitted nothing unexpounded whereby he that is anything exercised in the Scripture of God, might justly complain of hardness." The marginal notes were looked upon with suspicion by those parties in the English Church not in sympathy with the Calvinism of the Puritan party. That the notes contained occasional germs of Calvinistic doctrine cannot be denied, but on the whole they were characterized by sound and sober scholarship rather than doctrinal bias.

The Geneva Bible was strongly influenced by the earlier works of Wycliffe and Tyndale, although there was no reluctance to make fresh and more accurate renderings when recourse to the original texts indicated that such changes were required. No English translation prior to the Revision of 1881 was characterized by more careful scholarship than was the Geneva Bible. Its style and language was the dominant influence on the Bishop's Bible of 1568 and the King James Bible of 1611. Indeed, the language of the Geneva Bible was so carefully followed in the King James Bible that more credit should be given to the exiled scholars than has been done. If it is true that the King James Bible is a monument of English style and expression, some of that praise most certainly belongs to the translators of the Geneva Bible.

Although the Geneva Bible was never authorized for public use, it became at once extremely popular among all classes of English readers. It was the household Bible of all England. It became the household Bible of the New England families who carried it from Scrooby to Leyden and across the waters with the founding of New Plymouth and the Pilgrim Church. For seventy-five years the Geneva Bible held the foremost position among English translations, passing through more than one hundred and fifty editions, and exerting an influence on the history and life of our land which cannot be measured. Its plain, clear language provided the moral compulsions necessary to send the Pilgrim fathers forth into the wilderness to establish a way of life and order of church government consistent with the will of God as they understood it. In the long history of Bible translations, the makers of the Geneva Bible must always hold an honored place.

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