

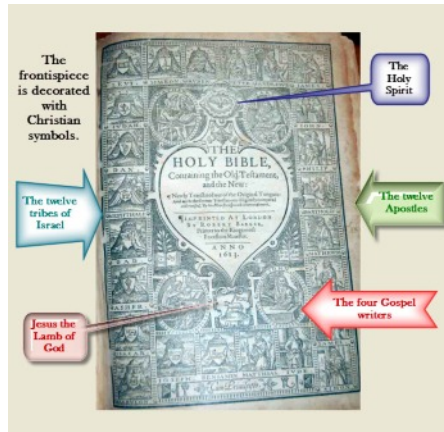
# The Original Geneva Bible



By Roger Nicole

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**C**HRISTIANITY IS THE RELIGION OF THE INCARNATE WORD, JESUS CHRIST, AND OF THE WRITTEN WORD, THE BIBLE. Wherever Christianity has gone, it has developed translations of Scripture as a necessity. The promise of Pentecost, where people of various origin heard of “the wonders of God in their own tongues” (Acts 2:11), has been fulfilled and continues to be increasingly fulfilled in the process of Bible translation. The whole Bible, or portions thereof, is now available in print in more than 2,000 languages.

In the British Isles, turbulent times accompanied the work of translating Scripture, but the first written translation of the whole Bible was made under the influence of John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384). Even though it had to be copied by hand, and in spite of a prohibition against English translations, there are still some two hundred manuscripts of it extant.

The first published text was William Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament (1526), based on the Greek and Hebrew texts, in Worms, Germany. He had completed the translation of the Pentateuch, Jonah, and Joshua-2 Chronicles before being martyred in 1536.

Miles Coverdale, encouraged by Archbishop Cramner and Secretary Thomas Cromwell, undertook to translate the whole Bible from the Vulgate (Latin) with the help of certain other translators in Latin or German and of Tyndale's own version. This was published in 1535 in Germany. In 1537 it was republished in Southwark, the first complete English Bible to be printed in England.

When Mary Tudor ascended the British throne (1553), she did her utmost to restore the Roman Catholic faith. Little did she realize that her anti-Protestant stance would indirectly foster the production of the most important 16th-century Bible, the "Geneva Bible," precipitated by the exile of a number of the influential Protestant leaders to Geneva. Notable among these were John Knox and William Whittingham. After establishing an English church in 1555, the refugees agreed that the most significant work they could do was to prepare and publish a new English translation of the whole Bible made in such a way that it would have a maximum accessibility to the common people of Britain. Whittingham was an excellent scholar in Greek, and Anthony Gilby and Christopher Goodman in Hebrew. Furthermore, there were at that time in Geneva a number of gifted scholars and printers.

The English refugees made ample use of these resources, and Whittingham and his associates laboured day and night to perform the task of preparing an English translation of the whole Bible. Earlier editions of the Bible had marginal notes, but the Geneva Bible accommodated them in a much greater proportion. Written in a Puritanic spirit, there was language that angered the royal family and some of the bishops of the Anglican Church who sought to impede the distribution and use of this Bible.

### **On June 10, 1557, the New Testament Appeared as Follows:**

"The New Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ. Conferred diligently with the Greke, and best approved translations. With the arguments, aswel before the chapters, as for every Boke & Epistle, also diversities of readings, and most

profitable annotations of all harde places: wherunto is added a copious Table. At Geneva Printed By Conrad Badius. M.D.LVII.”

Mary Tudor died on November 17, 1558. Her successor, Queen Elizabeth, was favourable to the reformation initiated by her father, Henry VIII. Many of those who were exiles under Mary hastened to return to the British Isles. Whittingham, however, and some of his associates remained in Geneva until 1560 to finish the publication of their edition of the Bible.

Inasmuch as the translation of the book of Psalms was completed, the Geneva group decided to publish it separately and to dedicate this work to Elizabeth. They prefixed a flowery letter to her, declaring that her accession to the throne was a special blessing from God. They established a parallel between her and King David in that both were enthroned after years of life-threatening persecutions. The queen was admonished to cling to the Lord and to His Word even as David did. An epistle to the reader was placed at the end.

After the publication of the Psalms in 1559, Whittingham and his associates labored diligently to bring to completion this momentous work. When one holds in his hands the large volume, one cannot fail to be impressed by the gigantic task involved in translating, annotating, printing, proofreading, and binding this book. The marginal annotations, written in exceedingly small type, are very unevenly distributed—relatively scanty in the Pentateuch and the historical books of the Old Testament, and very full in Job, Psalms, and the Prophets, as well as some Epistles and Revelation.

The New Testament was also published separately in 1560. The desire to make God’s Word available to English-speaking people is apparent. Those who could not afford to buy the whole Bible might at least purchase the New Testament.

Between 1560 and 1644, there were more than 140 editions of the Geneva Bible. In 1599 alone ten editions appeared. The first Geneva Bible to be printed in Britain was published in London by Christopher Berkes in 1575. The first printing in Scotland appeared in 1575.

The Genevan exiles labored with great earnestness for five years in order to give to their country a Bible that would reflect the best scholarship and yet be accessible even to those with moderate financial means. Challenged by others in Geneva who were publishing Bibles or New Testaments in Latin (1556, 1567), Italian (1555), French (22 editions in the 1550's), Spanish (1556, 1557), and Greek (1551) and by the success of the German Bibles (Luther 1534, Zwingli 1527–29), they worked untiringly to produce the Geneva Bible in 1560.

Thereafter, for more than 80 years, it dominated the field, surpassing greatly the official Bishops' Bible and giving great incentive to King James I. The Genevan marginal notes did not sit well with him, and so he provided the funds and assembled the scholars for preparation of the magnificent edition in 1611 of a New Authorized Version, known as the King James Version.

Even so it took many years for the latter to catch up with the production of the Geneva Bible, and it must be noted that at many places the 1611 translation was influenced by the work of the exiles. The Geneva Bible was the Bible of Shakespeare; it was the Bible of the Puritans; it was the Bible carried on their ships by the Jamestown settlers (1607) and the Plymouth Pilgrims (1620). Harvard University treasures the copy that Governor Bradford brought with him on the Mayflower. Nothing else that the exiles could have done would possibly approximate the boon to Britain and the influence in the world which the Genevan Bible turned out to be.

And now a new Geneva Bible is to appear, ironically enough with the text of the New King James Bible, but once again with notes intended to emphasize the Reformed character of Holy Scripture. What its influence may be no one yet knows, but those who produced it are confident that "their labour will not be in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).



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