

TRANSLATION AND THEORY - THE GENEVA BIBLE AND JAUSS' "HORIZON OF EXPECTATIONS"

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The Geneva Bible was the Bible that became the Bible of its generation, favoured by an impressive array of writers from Shakespeare and Spenser to Milton. Read on its own terms, however, it demanded devotion rather than mere exegesis. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the achievement of the Geneva Bible from the point of view of reading by examining what the translation asked of its original readers and how it changed their "horizon of expectations". This method, adapted from the reception-theory of Hans Robert Jauss, provides a means by which to assess the readers' responses to the Geneva Bible. Central to the Geneva Bible's achievement was the model of reading it prescribed —"simple reading": the readers of the Geneva Bible were called to become "simple readers".

The historical situation

First published in 1560, the Geneva Bible was produced and read at a time of crisis in English history. Following Mary's accession in 1553, almost 1,000 English Protestants fled to the Continent, mainly to Germany and Switzerland. The group represented the most radical faction of English Protestantism. Calvin's Geneva in the 1550s was a centre for biblical textual scholarship which resulted in new editions of the Greek and Hebrew texts, a factor which attracted many of the exiles. It was here, in a scholarly and spiritually favourable environment that a team of translators, lead by William Whittingham, began work on a new English Bible.

The result of their labours was a Bible for an England still under the threat of Catholic rule and for a church still in need of reform (in their view). The new version of the scriptures was one means to this end. The very name of the Bible —"Geneva" —carried with it the spirit

of a radical, strongly Calvinist Protestantism which did not win the new version favour in the eyes of secular and ecclesiastical government. Even as late as the 1630s, eight pirated editions had to be smuggled into England to avoid the persecution of Archbishop Laud.

The Geneva Bible transformed the Bible-reading habits of the English and the Scottish; it was the means by which non-specialist reading of the Bible became commonplace. As the readers read, marked, learned and inwardly digested the sacred text, the text gave them a spiritual grid through which to interpret their worldly experiences. Innovations, such as its verse divisions and smaller size, made it seem to its readers a new and different version, one for them to read. The Geneva Bible was the most widely read book of any kind in the Elizabethan era and into the seventeenth century.

Readers: "original", "implied", "simple"

There is little point in offering a new critical reading of the Geneva Bible for twentieth century readers, for it is no longer a text that is widely read, either devotionally or academically. Its role as an actively used Bible ended some three hundred years ago. It is this distance between the reception of a text in its historical context and the modern reader that Hans Robert Jauss attempts to overcome by his *Rezeptionsaesthetik*. Jauss, in elaborating his "theory of reception", suggests the possibility of reconstructing what he calls the "horizon" of the expectations of the first readers of a text:

The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations enables one to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and thereby to discover how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work.

The prime emphasis of Jauss' reception theory is not on the response of a single reader at a given time, but on the changing responses, interpretive and evaluative, of the general reading public over a span of time. The key to a historically sympathetic reading of the Geneva Bible is, therefore, the contemporary readers and their "horizon of expectations". How did the Geneva Bible meet, fail to meet, and challenge what its readers expected of a book purporting to be the Word of God? The achievement of the Geneva Bible lay in so re-

orienting its readers in the way they read the Bible that they became the "simple readers", the type of reader (and reading) for whom it was produced.

The preface to the Geneva Bible, headed "*To Ovr Beloved In The Lord The Brethren Of England, Scotland, Ireland, &c*", outlines the intention of the translators, not just to translate, but to provide explanation of difficult passages with the purpose of "edifying the brethren in faith and charitie": The "brethren" for whom this is the case were "the simple readers" of whom they write:

...tittle is changed for feare of troubling the simple readers.

William Tyndale's pioneering vision that the common person might have access to the Scriptures in his or her native (or "simple") English is continued in the desire of the Geneva Bible to find "simple readers". The search for readers who are "simple" is a reflection of the Protestants' predilection for the words "simple" and "simplicity", whether in reference to character, dress or prose style. The words for the Genevan translators carry a special meaning referring to a naive straightforwardness of character that is both a virtue and a danger. In the references in the Geneva Bible's Old Testament, for example Psalm 119:130, the "simple" person is one who is self-aware but also immediately responsive to the Scriptures. In the New Testament, the "simplicitie that is in Christ" is a part of the godly life. To be simple is to be innocent, to be humble, and to place oneself under the authority of the Bible; needless to say the "simple" reader is asked to accept the Bible's authority as it is transmitted in the translation of the Genevan exiles.

The Geneva Bible's use of the "simple" stems also from the historical type of the "holy fool", a figure having provenance in the Pauline "holy fool" of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. There is an ambiguity in the type of the "holy fool" in that although "fool" implies innocence and naivete, the Pauline figure is at the same time able to disarm the worldly powers. The "fool of Christ" thus has a radical political edge. The image of the "simple reader" is thus a Protestant extension of the long tradition of the "holy fool". It is also worth remembering that the word has a particularly anti-Catholic overtone, reflecting the Protestant critique of Catholic adornments and superstitions and the Protestant desire for plainness of worship. The idea of the "simple" reader reverberates with these meanings: the reader is an uncomplicated character whose Protestant faith is

unwavering and whose desire to know God through and by His word is undoubted.

The familial relationship between the readers and the book, however, extends beyond the realm of pastoral guidance: the "simple readers" were given direction on reading the Bible. What the Geneva translators had done, in effect, was to give every reader the tools to be his own Bible scholar. The "simple readers" were now able to read the Bible without reference to the original languages or to the latest scholarly commentary in order to make interpretive judgements about the text. Only privileged readers had the intellect, the leisure and the money to study these; the Geneva Bible, following in the tradition of Tyndale, was designed for the ploughman and the dairy maid to read. In this it gave him great assistance: the extensive system of annotations, notes and cross-references acted as guides for the uninformed reader. The preface speaks of the translator's attempts to keep to the:

Hebrew phrases, notwithstanding that they may seem somewhat hard in their ears that are not well practised and also delight in the sweet sounding phrases of the Holy Scriptures.

To resolve the problems caused by such strict adherence to the original tongue:

we haue in the margent noted that diversity of speech or of reading which may also seem agreeable to the mind of the Holy Gost and propre for our language.

The marginal notes thus strive to preserve accuracy in a translation for which the priority is to be accessible. The most straightforward notes, following the desire for accuracy, offer the literal translations of the original text. Sometimes this is in order to cover modernisms, introduced to facilitate the reading of the simple, which sit uneasily in the passage. Perhaps the most famous example of such a modernism needing explanation is in Genesis 3:7, where Adam and Eve make themselves "breeches" from fig leaves. The marginal note offers:

Ebr. things so girde about them to hide their privities.

The Geneva Bible here makes a conscious break from Tyndale, who

rendered the same Hebrew word "aprons", a practice in which the Authorized Version followed him. The Geneva translators demonstrate a fear that the word "aprons" would not reflect the sense of the Hebrew 'chago-ro-t' a word referring particularly to coverings for the genitalia, and so opt for their anachronistic alternative which, to give them credit, is a contemporary equivalent; yet at the same time they feel that "breeches" needs explaining in literal terms. Two further tendencies are illustrated here: first, the Geneva Bible shows a preference for words of Anglo-Saxon origin (like "breeches") over words of Latin and French origin (like "aprons"); and second, "brechis" is Wyclif's rendering, which the Geneva translators often prefer to Tyndale. The result of a seemingly unnecessary anxiety is that the Geneva Bible became scornfully known as "The Breeches Bible". To give the Geneva Bible the sobriquet "The Breeches Bible" was to highlight with contempt its concessions to the "simple readers". This extraordinary example reveals the competing concerns of the translators —on the one hand, to produce a Bible of the people (a breeches-size version perhaps?), while on the other the need for the translation to give literal renderings of the original.

The "simple readers" of the Geneva Bible were to be a community of believers whose godliness would stem from their "simplicity" —not just a lack of intellectual finesse, but an unadorned, innocent naivete, corresponding to the Pauline "holy fool" type. Acknowledging the pastoral care of the Geneva Bible itself was an integral element of "simple reading"; it was a source of comfort, rebuke and guidance. The Geneva Bible was to be read "simply"; its readers were to become "simple readers".

"Changing the horizon" —the annotations and the Geneva Bible as Scripture

Having defined "simple readers" and "simple reading", the task of this section is first to observe the operation of "simple reading" and how the strategy of reading offered to the "simple reader" by the annotations changed the "horizon of expectations". Second, following Jauss, who outlines expectations of genre as a key principle for understanding the process of reading a text, is an analysis of the Geneva Bible as it accords with the genre of "Scripture".

The Geneva Bible is, in many ways, a "closed" text, a text which

seeks to allow no diversity in interpretation by performing the interpretative task itself; it does not want to leave interpretative "gaps" for its reader to fill in creatively. It confidently surmounts the problem of such gaps by presenting notes surrounding the text for the purpose of expounding "all hard places most sincerely". By this method, the reader's task becomes delimited.

However, while undoubtedly exerting great influence on the reader, in tone they are usually gently persuasive and suggestive rather than authoritarian. They draw the "simple readers" into a devotional mode of reading, concentrating their minds on issues of faith and hope. A good example of the way the notes limit interpretation without appearing dictatorial can be found in the story of David and Bathsheba in *The Seconde Booke of Samuël*, chapter 11. David at this moment in the narrative is a heroic figure—one who has triumphed over Saul and one to whom God has specifically renewed his Abrahamic promises. The first point of interest in this story is David's inactivity. The chapter opens at a specifically designated point in time, that is, "in the time when Kings go forth to battel" (the Geneva Bible indicates that "to battel" is the translator's addition). David is not openly condemned for sending out others to fight instead of himself; but the last clause of the verse (accentuated in effect by the verse division) chillingly reveals the discrepancy in David's unkingly behaviour. It is as if his inactivity, his desire to stay away from the pursuit of war, is the cause of his calamitous sins. David's chief sin at this point seems to be his decadence, and it is this failing that the Geneva Bible wants the "simple reader" to take note of—vs.2 note b directs the attention of the reader to the evil Ish-bosheth: "Whereupon he vsed to rest at after none, as was red of Ish-bosheth, chap.4, 7". Chapter 4:7 relates in gruesome detail the demise of this character as a result of his laziness:

For when they came into the house, he slept on his bed in his bedchamber, and they smote him, and slewe him, and beheaded him and toke his head, and gate them away through the plaine all the night.

The Geneva Bible's notes have in this way subtly foregrounded David's sin of sloth as the beginnings of his later misdeeds. The reader then experiences with him the guilt of adultery, murder and the desperate struggle to "cloake" his sins. The purpose of this episode is to "drowne him in sinne", as the note to chapter 12, vs.1 puts it. The readers are engaged through their identification with David; reading

this story as one of the "simple readers" is thus a personal experience and confession of guilt.

Having defined the "simple readers" and examined the way in which they were prompted to read, what made up their "horizon of expectations" for the Geneva Bible? Jauss mentions the "pre-understanding of the genre" of a work as having particular bearing on its significance as a literary event. As scripture, The Geneva Bible was a surprising book for its readers for several reasons. Firstly, it represented an attempt to provide a demystified, accessible Bible. The act of interpreting the Bible was now no longer the demesne of a priestly class — the book contained its own interpretation. The translators go out of their way to unravel the difficulties of the "hard places" rather than to shroud them in encoded mystery. Historians such as Patrick Collinson, especially in his book *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, have highlighted the verve with which biblical interpretation was carried out by a diverse range of people. Certainly preachers of the period acted as "privileged interpreters" of the Bible but there was, in the Elizabethan period, an unusual variety of debate with regards to the interpretation of the Bible of which the Geneva Bible was both a cause and a symptom.

The second issue that arises is that of the reading context. It would be naive to suggest that a "simple reader" could read the Geneva Bible in a situation free from the influence of other readers; and, historically speaking, reading the Geneva Bible was at least a domestic, if not a community, activity. The Geneva Bible was especially read at "prophesyings", which had none of the formal aspects of authorized worship, and by families around the dinner table. The text itself, with its attempt to privilege the lay reader, was responsible for its being read in this manner. Well into the seventeenth century, non-conformist groups continued the emphasis on lay reading.

To be read by the family in the home was a deliberate aim of the translators of the Geneva Bible: this is just as John Bruen of Stapleford in Cheshire did, calling his family and servants together to read a chapter and pray. Was their text any less "sacred"? The Geneva Bible was in many ways responsible for the devotional reading of the Bible by the family recorded in the Elizabethan age. The social historian Lawrence Stone argues that during this time the heads of households appropriated the authority and social function of the priest. The new "sacred context" for reading the Bible was the household.

The translators, following Tyndale, aimed to bridge the gap between the specially empowered or privileged interpreter, and the

garden-variety believer, principally by giving the believer access to the text and some primitive interpreting tools. If there were privileged interpreters of the Geneva Bible, they were many and varied. Despite being a closed text, the rise of non-conformists of various types in the century following the Geneva Bible's publication — Presbyterian, Puritan, Baptist, Quaker and others — is evidence that no single authority governed its interpretation outside the book itself. The Geneva Bible deliberately dis-authorized the existing caste of privileged interpreters, and as well empowered various new ones. In addition there was an overwhelming production of Bibles at this time. The research of Peter Clark in his article "The Ownership of Books in England, 1560-1640", although confined to the Kent region, gives weight to evidence of extensive lay readership of the Geneva Bible. He finds that the Bible was by far the most-owned book among all classes. Admittedly, Clark does not specify which version was owned, but the probability is that nearly all the Bibles counted were Geneva Bibles: first, because the Geneva Bible was the only translation published with a private readership in mind; and second, because, as Maurice Betteridge's table "Editions 1557-1644" shows, 107 editions of the Geneva Bible were produced in that period for 19 editions of the Bishops' Bible.

Furthermore, the Geneva Bible was an authoritative book without the backing of the authorities. Never accepted as the authorized version (except in Scotland), it still functioned as a "sacred text", if not *the* sacred text in the Elizabethan period. The Bishops' Bible could not supersede it — even bishops preferred to preach from the Geneva Bible despite the liturgical use of the Bishops' Bible. Even more embarrassing is the fact that in introducing their new version in 1611 — the version intended to succeed the Geneva Bible — the translators of the Authorized Version quote the very translation that they are replacing!

Even beyond its dis-authorization of privileged interpreters, the Geneva Bible expressed common purpose and fellowship with the community of readers it addresses as "Brethren": indeed it assumed an interpretive unity. That is to say, the translators and their intended audience held in common their religious persuasion — in this case a Calvinist Protestantism — including a shared view of the authority of Scripture and its interpretation. This is a claim that Bibles such as the Bishop's Bible and the Authorized Version were unable to make, serving as they did as Bibles of the establishment. As a consequence, the Geneva Bible sets itself out as the text of an English-speaking

community of believers, rather than as a "national" Bible, despite the dedication to Elizabeth. The process of reading the Geneva Bible became one of belonging to a family of believers: this sense of unity is also in the recognition in the *Epistle to the Reader* of the shared sufferings of Queen Mary's reign; this is the Bible of exiles, prepared for a persecuted community, their Protestantism, and thus their interpretation of the Bible, being their common bond. The Geneva Bible in many ways was an expression of this bond; and it certainly continued as the Bible of the persecuted.

Even if Bibles had been commonly distributed before the Geneva Bible, the majority of people would have lacked the intellectual equipment with which to have read them. The Geneva Bible, despite its appeal to the new Queen, Elizabeth, was not the exclusive property of an authoritative organization, ecclesiastical or political. Not only could it be read by the literate public—they were also able to own one. The Geneva Bible tries not to encode; rather, it makes an attempt to decode. In this way it challenged the "horizon of expectations" of its readers with regard to sacred texts, especially following the oppression of the Marian period. The Geneva Bible further deviated from its readers' pre-understanding of the genre of Scripture through the many innovations in the production of the Geneva Bible: its verse and chapter divisions, its size (small, compared to previous Bibles), its annotations, arguments, tables, maps and diagrams, its use of roman type, and its widespread circulation (among other things, it was the most *available* Bible) were at this time generic deviations which contributed to its impact, not just as a "literary event", but as a sociological, a political and a religious one. The unusual accessibility of this translation made Bible-reading an activity open to virtually all who could read. Even in its form and appearance the Geneva Bible communicated its own desire to be read by many. It appeared in stark contrast to the heaviness and Gothic typeface of the previous generation of English Bibles.

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