

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE GENEVA BIBLE

The Geneva Bible stands as one of the great achievements of Biblical scholarship. It is the Bible of “firsts”.

- It was the first English Bible to be fully translated from the original languages. The fall of Constantinople (1453) had a providential benefit, as previously unknown Greek and Hebrew manuscripts were carried to the West by Christians fleeing the Islamic onslaught. The Renaissance Period’s interest in antiquity also brought authentic documents and historical details to the attention of the Geneva scholars.
- It was the first Bible translation to be printed in easy-to-read Roman type, rather than the older “Black Face” Gothic text. The 2006 edition of the 1599 Geneva version goes a step further; while keeping the Bible text and notes accurate word-for-word with the 16th-century edition, spelling has been updated and the type reset in an even easier-to-read form.
- It was the first Bible to qualify as a study Bible, providing readers with copious notes, annotations, and commentary about the original manuscripts, clarification of ambiguous meanings, and cross references. It is a tribute to the intellectual integrity of the translators that they also used italics for the interpolated words that were not in the original languages—helpful for the English vernacular, and the first-ever use of this tool in historical or literary analysis.
- It was the first Bible to assign chapter demarcation, and to add verse numbers within chapters. These innovations facilitated the location of passages, memorization, and recitation... and the nurture of a nation of Bible readers.
- It was the first Bible to be printed in a small quarto edition, portable and affordable. This made it suitable for family use without expensive folios. Every Pilgrim family, for example, had a Geneva Bible as the convenient center of its daily life.

IMPACT OF THE GENEVA BIBLE

The Geneva Bible significantly assisted the creation of the modern English language—the lingua franca of today’s world. William Tyndale’s linguistic genius and the poetic mastery of Miles Coverdale’s earlier translation of the Poetic Books are widely credited with sparking the English literary excellence of the 17th and 18th centuries: the Geneva Bible was the Bible of William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Bunyan, the Puritans (considered history’s greatest expositors), and the Pilgrims who sailed to America. It was the Bible that John Rolfe likely would have used in the conversion of Pocahontas at Jamestown in 1611.

The impact of the annotations and commentary in the

Geneva Bible cannot be underestimated. The Calvinist notes of the Geneva Bible infuriated King James I at Hampton Court in 1604, prompting him to authorize a group of Puritan scholars to produce a version of the Bible without annotation for him; ironically, the excellent Authorized Version might never have been written were it not for King James’s antipathy toward the Geneva Bible.

The marginal notes of the Geneva Bible present a systematic Biblical worldview centered on the Sovereignty of God over all of His creation including churches and kings. This unique Biblical emphasis, though fraught with dangers beyond spiritual debates (i.e., political and social pressure), was one of John Calvin’s great contributions to the English Reformers. For example, the marginal note in the Geneva Bible for Exodus 1:19 indicated that the Hebrew midwives were correct to disobey the Egyptian rulers. King James called such interpretations “seditious.” The tyrant knew that if the people could hold him accountable to God’s Word, his days as a king ruling by “Divine Right” were numbered, but Calvin and the Reformers defended the clear meaning of Scripture against whims of king or popes. Thus did the Geneva Bible begin the unstoppable march to liberty in England, Scotland, and America.

The marginal notes of the Geneva Bible also served to liberate believers from the ignorance, heresy, and tyranny of the Middle Ages. Calvin, and the Reformers who followed in his footsteps, expounded the whole counsel of God concerning doctrines of Sola Scriptura—the Word of God alone, inspired and directional for our lives and culture; Sola Fide—faith alone as the only means of justification before God; Sola Christus—Christ alone as mankind’s only mediator, lord, and king; Sola Gratia—grace alone as the only hope of salvation and sanctification; and Soli Deo Gloria—God alone, not king nor pope, to receive the glory He is due in heaven and on earth.

Today, these theological “marginalia” might seem rudimentary or innocuous, but when they were systematically taught from Scripture and applied to life, as was done in the commentary in the Geneva Bible, entire nations and societies were transformed. Ultimately, the knowledge of and obedience to God’s written Word led to constitutional, limited government; the end of slavery and the caste system; free enterprise and the concept of private property; the so-called Puritan work ethic that fueled the scientific and industrial revolutions; wholesome, uplifting standards in the arts; and many other forms of progress.

The bold innovations of the Geneva Bible continue to have an impact in today’s world. Because of its revolutionary format and features, the Geneva Bible became the foundation for what we call group Bible study, and was a catalyst for the acceptance of the liberating doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” Puritan lay leaders