

The Geneva Bible: How Reformed Refugees Shaped Renaissance Reading of Scripture

W. GORDON CAMPBELL

Abstract

“Geneva Bible” is an umbrella-term for two New Testaments and two Bibles: an inaugural New Testament (1557), followed by a study Bible (1560), provided vernacular Scripture in English for believers under duress in Britain; then each was later refined, in 1576 and 1599 respectively.¹ The first translators and publishers were English-speaking Reformed refugees from persecution under Mary Tudor, who brought their expertise and industry to a flowering of international biblical scholarship in 1550s Geneva, alongside fellow refugees from other repressive European contexts. This article explores how they and their successors progressively resourced readers to engage with Scripture via sophisticated peritextual aids.

Keywords

Genesis 1, Geneva, Junius, Matthew 1, peritextual material, readers and reading, refuge(e), Revelation, Tomson, Whittingham

¹ Geneva Bibles in the Gamble Library special collection, in Union Theological College, Belfast (where I work), gave special impetus to this research.

Introduction

No commission or warrant from either the English Church or the state occasioned the Geneva Bible in English—unlike the 1568 Bishops’ Bible or 1611 King James Bible (or Authorized Version)—even though the first underwriter, John Bodley, would soon receive Queen Elizabeth I’s exclusive permission to print it.² Under her Stuart successor, the King James Bible would explicitly rework the Bishops’ Bible yet cite the universally used Geneva Bible in its long, introductory translators’ letter, implicitly revise it,³ and eventually supplant it. This eclipse has left the Geneva Bible largely forgotten today, along with the huge success it enjoyed, or impact it made, from the late 1570s onward until well into the seventeenth century.

Between its launch in 1560 and that of the King James Bible in 1611, more than one hundred and twenty editions of the Geneva New Testament or Bible appeared, with a further sixty even after the King James Version emerged. (Some King James editions had Geneva notes added.) Across these decades, most ministers—whether Puritan or Anglican—would routinely preach from the Geneva, rather than from either the Bishops’ or King James: the Geneva Bible was the bestselling and by far the most affordable, freely available, and widely used Bible among ordinary English-speaking people, with “something like half a million copies in circulation.”⁴ It may thus rightly be dubbed “the household book for all England and Scotland”⁵ or simply “the Bible of virtually everyone.”⁶ The Geneva Bible’s erstwhile popularity prompts this article’s effort to illuminate the reading experience that it so successfully pioneered.

Contextually, the Geneva Bible is an outflow, downstream, from the dual wellspring of a previous generation (in the 1520s–1530s): Martin Luther’s

² Ira Jay Martin III notes the condition for the patent granted to Bodley: that “the Puritan features in the disturbing marginal notes” be toned down; see Ira Jay Martin III, “The Geneva Bible,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 1 (1961): 48; see further note 32 below.

³ For the Geneva Bible as a gold standard, in the eyes of the King James translators, see Jeffrey A. Miller, “Better, as in the Geneva: The Role of the Geneva Bible in Drafting the King James Version,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47.3 (2017): 517–43.

⁴ Thus Thomas Fulton, *The Book of Books: Biblical Interpretation, Literary Culture, and the Political Imagination from Erasmus to Milton* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 21.

⁵ Martin, “Geneva Bible,” 46, for whom the Geneva Bible is “easily the most accurate and scholarly English translation up to the time of the King James Version,” making it prime “reading matter in the average households of the land” (47), “a matchless translation” (48), and a “masterpiece of translation and publication” (49).

⁶ Fulton, *Book of Books*, 111.

German Bible and William Tyndale's English New Testament and incomplete Bible. In a companion piece, I investigate how, from the project's inception in 1557 through to the 1590s, the Geneva New Testament or Bible emanated from and exploited those twin sources, with particular consideration of the special exegetical attention paid by Luther and second-generation Reformed theologians to John's Revelation.⁷ My focus in the present contribution is, however, the early modern reading experience that the Geneva Bible launched and developed through its various iterations and the readers that its successive versions sought both to mold and to serve: essentially biblically literate believers who read the Bible nonprofessionally around the kitchen table and applied Scripture to their life and context. The Geneva Bible inaugurated no less than a transformation of "the Bible-reading habits of the English and the Scottish ... [as] the means by which non-specialist reading of the Bible became commonplace;"⁸ accordingly, my particular aim here is to offer a comprehensive picture of the range of exegetical aids provided by successive Geneva Bibles and thereby to evaluate the translators' and publishers' success in creating and then sustaining this new phenomenon.

The article title specifies all of the main *connected aspects* for exploration:

1. The title *Geneva Bible* (preceded by a New Testament) connotes a foreign geographical context—1550s Geneva—and bespeaks a dearth of Bibles in England and repression there that prevented a local remedy. While Henry VIII's previous restraints on Bible publication in English were lifted by Edward VI, during whose short reign (1547–1553), no fewer than thirty-five editions of the New Testament and thirteen of the whole Bible in English were published,⁹ this positive upturn was quickly reversed by his successor Mary Tudor (1553–1558), who hunted down and burned thousands of copies of Scripture in English, along with several hundred Protestants.

2. Choosing flight over martyrdom to escape her clutches (mostly by early 1554), hundreds more of Mary's potential victims made initially for Frankfurt before many of them subsequently took second refuge in Calvin's Geneva. It is these fugitives who are the *Reformed refugees* of my title. In

⁷ W. Gordon Campbell, "The Geneva Bible's Expansion of Luther's Innovative Approach to Reading and Interpreting the Book of Revelation in the Vernacular," in *Martin Luther's Bible: Perspectives on a Rich Legacy*, ed. W. Gordon Campbell (Cambridge: James Clarke, forthcoming).

⁸ Michael Jensen, "'Simply' Reading the Geneva Bible: The Geneva Bible and Its Readers," *Literature and Theology* 9 (1995): 31. Jensen thoroughly characterizes the reading and reader being facilitated, sampling the explanatory approach taken in select marginal notes and relevant texts.

⁹ William F. Moulton, *The History of the English Bible* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878; repr., Norderstedt: Hansebooks, 2019), 150.

1550s Geneva, a Reformed Church was well established, yet this relatively stable ecclesial phenomenon masks a core defining element of note: *exile*. Like William Farel and Theodore Beza, John Calvin himself had fled France, and the Geneva he knew was, in reality, “a city packed with exiles.”¹⁰ Whatever the language of expression of its Reformed churches, all were led and largely shaped by migrants whose refugee status helped craft their mindset and define their theological stance. The English-language exiles established and developed their distinctive community from November 1555 onwards, sharing the building in which they met for worship with fellow refugees from Italy.¹¹

3. By *Reformed*, I also mean to imply the scholarly credentials of those involved in the English Bible project. Geneva at the time was not merely conducive spiritually or ecclesially but a veritable hub of scholarship, bustling with multilingual endeavors in Bible production. From the safety it provided, refugees from various fraught European contexts (not least France) undertook Bible translation and publication efforts that furthered reformation and spread the gospel in homelands characterized by persecution and turmoil. Thus, asylum in Geneva proved ideal and providential for responding to a famine of God’s word back in Britain. The English Bible was undeniably “the exile community’s most enduring contribution,”¹² amid a broader literary output, with first a New Testament (1557) and quickly thereafter (1560) an entire Bible. By then, migrants no longer, almost all the refugees had returned home with their reformist ideas and intentions; but even so, Geneva would remain the point of supply through further printings in 1562 and 1570 until, after 1575, the Geneva New Testament or Bible could at last be lawfully printed in England.

4. Reference in the title to *renaissance* reading draws attention to the Geneva Bible’s context of production and influence: the English Renaissance and the early growth and consolidation of Protestantism in the British Isles, when politics, religion, and culture were thoroughly intertwined. Even as it was reforming lives across different strata of society, the Geneva Bible was also refining letters, profoundly impacting the artistic elite, among them John Donne, William Shakespeare, and Edmund Spenser. Fundamentally, “the point of the Geneva Bibles is to help understanding

¹⁰ Jane E. A. Dawson, “Scotland and the Example of Geneva,” *Theology in Scotland* 16.2 (2009): 55.

¹¹ David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 278.

¹² O. T. Hargrave, “The Predestinarian Offensive of the Marian Exiles at Geneva,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 42.2 (1973): 113.

and faith,” and their production was a profoundly Christian and evangelistic gesture; yet, simultaneously, “the life of Geneva Bibles coincided with the very highest flourishing of literature in English life from 1560 to 1660, that extraordinary uprush of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline drama, poetry and prose.”¹³ As the go-to Bible of the period, the Genevan thoroughly influenced letters, politics, and culture, as well as theology, and it remained the most familiar English Bible in Britain and Ireland and the New World colonies until at least the 1640s, long after the King James Bible’s appearance.

5. This article’s ultimate focus is the Geneva Bible’s energetic promotion of an informed *reading of Scripture*. Emanating initially from a place of refuge, its developing reading experience, traceable across its four emblematic sixteenth-century editions, would always address an evolving religio-political context.

I. *The 1557 New Testament*

Today, the 1557 New Testament¹⁴ is still largely or wholly credited to just one exiled English scholar, William Whittingham. Upon opening it, the reader encounters a title-page (see Figure 1) that bears the legend “God by tyme restoreth trvth and maketh her victorivovs”;¹⁵ this is framed by an illustration of Lady Truth being restored to life, under God, by Father Time, who is a hybrid of angel, man, and faun or satyr, equipped with hour-glass and reaper’s scythe.

Together, word and image may well evoke interrelated themes: the deadly reign of Mary and the action, and providential impact, of making God’s word accessible through this New Testament. However, perhaps most significant is the title page’s implicit appeal to efforts that readers will themselves expend when profiting from its helps: this New Testament’s producers have made their translation the best they can, by reference to the Greek and to the best vernacular versions, and the arguments, readings, and annotations aim to instruct readers in reading well: in short, “critical study is invited.”¹⁶

¹³ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 375. Daniell discusses how Spenser and Shakespeare explore and exploit the book of Revelation (376–88) and explores “The English Bible in America: From the Beginnings to 1640” (389–426), when colonists overwhelmingly used the Geneva Bible.

¹⁴ All reference is to *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: A Fac-simile* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1842), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/yale.39002012678489>.

¹⁵ For quotations, original spelling is retained. Readers should note how, at this period, the letters *v* and *u*, *y* and *i* or *j* and *i* were interchangeable, or how *ē* abbreviates *-en*. For the sake of clarity, occasional words are repeated with modern spelling.

¹⁶ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 276.

Following a translation of Calvin's Dedicatory Epistle comes a first-person singular anonymous General Preface: "To the Reader Mercie and Peace through Christ our Saviour." The implied reader is a "simple" reader—a designation that self-consciously draws on, and repeats, advice by Miles Coverdale twenty years previously on how to get the best out of Bible reading. Exhorting his reader directly, Coverdale promotes a kind of who-what-when-where-why approach to what is being read:

It shall greatly help ye to understonde Scripture, if thou marke not onely what is spoken or wrytten, but of whom, & vnto whom, with what wordes, at what tyme, where, to what intent, with what circumstance, consyderynge what goeth before, and what foloweth after.¹⁷

Coverdale's ideal reader, a "symple" person, is humble and unpretentious in responding thus to the Scriptures.

On its opening page, the 1557 preface provides further clues to the reader and reading ethos envisaged. Speaking initially of a "true Christian," it later identifies "thre kyndes of mē" in Christ's church: first, "malicious despicers," second, those who "quarell and cauell, or els deride and mocke"; and third, the category that the translator especially has in mind, the elect:

... the simple lambes, which partely are already in the folde of Christ, and so heare willingly their Shepheards voice, and partly wandering astray by ignorance, tary the tyme tyll the Shepherde fynde them and bring them vnto his flocke.

Like Coverdale, the Geneva Bible calls for biblically literate, wholesomely fed believers.

But what if ordinary believers lacked access to commentaries or works of theology? The 1557 preface also assures such readers that summaries preceding each book and chapter, and accompanying contextual side notes, will fully meet their needs. Not merely for readers well versed in Scripture, these interpretative aids are equally for "the simple and unlearned": notes are plain and brief, such "that the verie ignorant may easely vnderstande them and beare them in memorie." Such language may sound disparaging today, but it targets listeners' mnemonic powers, has consideration for "the needs of struggling readers" and seeks to "enhance literacy for the sake of salvation."¹⁸ On page three, the translator claims a degree of comprehensiveness:

¹⁷ Miles Coverdale, *A Prologe: Myles Coverdale unto the Christen Reader* (prob. Antwerp, 1535), 4; <https://archive.org/details/1535-coverdale-bible>.

¹⁸ Femke Molekamp, "Using a Collection to Discover Reading Practices: The British Library Geneva Bibles and a History of Their Early Modern Readers," *Electronic British Library Journal*, art. 10 (2006).

THE
 NEVV E TESTA-
 MENT OF OVR LORD IE-
 fus Christ.

Conferred diligently with the Greke, and best ap-
 proued translations.

*With the arguments, aswel before the chapters, as for euery Boke
 & Epistle, also diuersities of readings, and moste profitable
 annotations of all harde places: wherunto is added a copi-
 ous Table.*



AT GENEVA
 Printed By Conrad Badius.
 M. D. LVII.

Figure 1. The 1557 Geneva New Testament title page.

I have endeoured so to proffit all therby, that both the learned and others might be holpen: for to my knollage I have omitted nothing vnexpounded, wherby he that is anything exercised in the Scriptures of God, might iustely complain of hardenes.

A first directly text-centered reading aid precedes Matthew’s Gospel: “The Argument of the Gospel, writ by the four Evangelists,” presented as a “historie writtē by Matthewe, Marke, Luke and Iohn.” Balancing the Gospels’ differences and commonalities, it mostly commends the fourfold Gospel—whose “very substance” is Jesus Christ—and in its first paragraph defends the unity in diversity of the Evangelists’ works:

The Spirit of God so gouerned their hearts, that although they were foure in number, yet in effect and purpose they so consent, as thogh the whole had bene composed by any one of them. And albeit in stile and maner of writing they be diuers, and some tyme one writeth more largely that which the other doth abridge: neuertheles in matter and argumēt they all tende to one ende: which is, to publishe to the worlde the fauour of God towarde mankynde through Christ Iesus, whome the Father hath geuen as a pledge of his mercie and loue.

A similar short argument prefaces every subsequent New Testament book from Acts onwards.

Beyond these preliminaries, only peritextual material¹⁹ adorning Matthew’s opening page separates readers from Matthew 1:1 (see Figure 2).

The decorative header, book title, and note (recalling the argument) that “gospel” means “good tidings” are followed by a short summary of Matthew 1. Similar succinct outlines will introduce every chapter of each New Testament book, furnishing a rudimentary Bible commentary to orient and empower ordinary Bible readers: “What the Geneva translators had done, in effect, was to give every reader the tools to be his own Bible scholar.”²⁰ These chapter summaries expand on more basic provision previously offered, in the 1530s, by the Coverdale Bible for Genesis and by the Matthew Bible for the whole of Scripture.²¹ As Stephanus’s 1553 French Bible had also provided short summaries (though no introductory arguments), the English Bible may have been consciously imitating it.

¹⁹ “Peritextual” material covers all elements ancillary to a text (called “paratexts”) that help readers engage with its content.

²⁰ Gerald Hammond, *The Making of the English Bible* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982), 95, quoted in Jensen, “‘Simply’ Reading,” 35.

²¹ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 281. For a comparative study of the chapter summaries in several early-modern Bibles (including the Geneva), see Ezra Horbury, “The Bible Abbreviated: Summaries in Early Modern English Bibles,” *Harvard Theological Review* 112.2 (2019): 235–60.

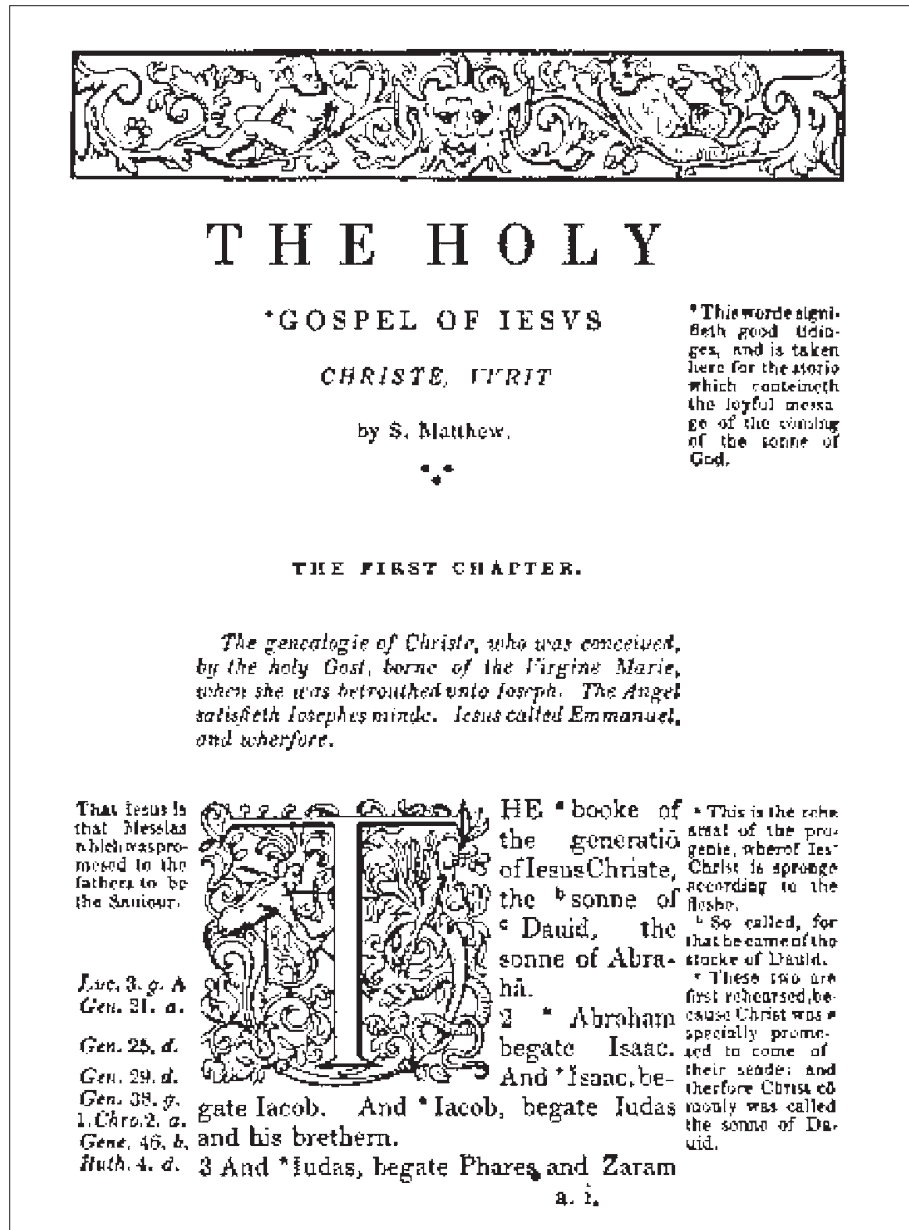


Figure 2. The 1557 Geneva New Testament opening page (Matthew 1:1-3).

As Matthew’s Gospel opens, the 1557 text sets Scripture in one central column. Throughout, a major innovation—invisible to our long-accustomed eyes—is the use of a roman font (a simple, vertical typeface): if this element slowed down readers habituated to a more elaborate Gothic script, that could only be of benefit.²² Two further important innovations, not seen before in English Bibles, were verse divisions and verse numbers “according to the best editions in other languages,” as acknowledged on page two of the preface: every verse now started on a new line as a distinct sense unit, inaugurating verse divisions that only a few Bishops Bibles or New Testaments subsequently declined to use²³ and taken for granted in English Bibles today. Stephanus had introduced both novelties into his 1551 Greek-Latin New Testament, 1552 Latin-French New Testament,²⁴ and 1553 French whole Bible.²⁵ Himself a refugee in Geneva from 1550 onwards,²⁶ Stephanus justified verse divisions as helping readers pause to follow up a reference or establish parallels and agreements between Bible texts; making each verse a new paragraph also assisted with reading aloud and especially suits units of parallelism in poetic texts. Conversely, the continuity and flow of consecutive narrative texts like Matthew’s Gospel, and much of Old or New Testament Scripture generally, could be imperiled by versification.²⁷

In Matthew 1:1, the letters a, b, or c point to corresponding explanatory notes in the right-hand margin. In Matthew 1:2, asterisked names in the text—like Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob—can be followed up in the index. The left-hand margin mostly contains parallel texts of Scripture, here largely from Genesis, in support of Matthew’s genealogy. A supplementary opening left-margin comment also captures the upshot of the chapter: “that

²² Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 284.

²³ Norton, “English Bibles,” 317 and note 35.

²⁴ Stephanus’s Latin text in small characters sits to the left of the French—both versions “translated from the Greek, corresponding to each other verse by verse” (my translation)—with verse numbers set in between, in a narrow dividing column. See Frédéric Delforge, *La Bible en France et dans la francophonie: Histoire, traduction, diffusion* (Paris: Publisud/Société biblique française, 1991), 82–83.

²⁵ For the numbered verses and chapter outlines in Stephanus’s 1553 French Bible, see, for example, the copy held by the University of Geneva, *La Bible, qui est toute la sainte Escripiture contenant le Vieil et Nouveau Testament, ou Alliance*, https://www.e-rara.ch/gep_g/content/zoom/12578370.

²⁶ Stephanus—French name, Robert Estienne—had been Francis I’s printer for Hebrew and Latin from 1539 and for Greek from 1540, being fluent in all three languages. For his sympathies with the Reformed faith, he had to flee Paris in 1550, setting up his press instead in Geneva, where, on his death in 1559, the business passed to his son, Henri. See, for example, “Robert I Estienne,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 3, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-I-Estienne>.

²⁷ See Norton, “English Bibles,” 317.

Jesus is that Messias which was promised to the fathers to be the Sauour.” Although page one has full margins, this is rather atypical since notes generally intrude little upon the Scripture text.

A few further peritextual tools for readers’ use come after the end of Revelation. The first, a forty-six-page alphabetical concordance to the NT, enjoins readers in the introduction to exhibit spiritual readiness, weapons of God’s word to hand: its twin columns run from Aaron to “Zeal without knollage [knowledge]” and set out “common places and principal points conteyned in the Newe testament.” Next, a calculation incorporating relevant time-periods mentioned in Scripture, computes the time-lapse separating Adam from Christ’s birth as 3974 years, six months, and ten days, correlating this reckoning with the time of writing:

Then the whole summe and number of yeres from the begynnyng of the worlde vnto this presente yere [year] of our Lord God 1557, are iust 5531, six monthes, and the said odde ten dayes.

Finally, a printer’s note gives the publication date (June 10, 1557), while a short list of “fautes [faults] committed in the printing” is appended, affecting ten New Testament books: the last of these, Revelation, acknowledges four errors,²⁸ but a fifth error—mislabeling Revelation 13 as Revelation 12 over again—was missed.

II. *The 1560 Geneva Bible*

Whittingham also spearheaded work on the whole Geneva Bible,²⁹ helped by fellow Oxford-trained linguists Anthony Gilby and Thomas Sampson and perhaps others.³⁰ They revised the 1557 New Testament and, for review of the Old Testament, took special account of the 1539 Great Bible. Production of the 1560 Bible began in January,³¹ and the printer was Rowland Hall, resident in Geneva since 1557 and engaged in printing since 1558. Costs were principally underwritten by John Bodley.³² This compact

²⁸ Revelation 5:6; 12:3; 16:17; and 19:20.

²⁹ Reference is to *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007).

³⁰ Lloyd E. Berry, “Introduction to the Facsimile Edition,” 8, suggests up to eleven.

³¹ See Carl S. Meyer, “The Geneva Bible,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32 (1961): 139.

³² Queen Elizabeth exclusively licensed Bodley to print the Geneva Bible in England between 1561 and 1568; already in 1564, Archbishop Matthew Parker and Bishop Edmund Grindal proposed a further twelve-year extension. In reality, before 1575 (when Parker died), none were actually printed in Britain, since for Parker “the return of the Marian exiles eager for a

Bible in English was designed for use in the home, its quarto size (6 ½ by 9 ¾ inches) making it inexpensive. Mirroring French Bibles from 1556 onwards, it contained the Psalter, dated 1559 for having been published separately in advance.³³ In 1562, a first small-folio edition Bible was produced, and later, in 1578, a first pulpit edition. Readers were, for the first time, offered “what amounted to an encyclopedia of Bible information”³⁴ that built on the foundations laid in 1557 and sometimes adapted marginal materials from the French Bible then simultaneously in production.³⁵

Although rather overelaborate, compared to its 1557 predecessor, the 1560 title page speaks volumes. As in 1557, it advertises the text’s conformity to the original Greek (and now Hebrew) and to “the best translations in diuers langages”³⁶ but points additionally to the Epistle to the Reader. It also displays an image of the parting of the Red Sea, captioned with Psalm 34:19 (“Great are the troubles of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all”) and with Exodus 14:13–14, evoking “the salvation of the Lord” who “shall fight for you.” Might the picture and captions connote less the Marian exiles’ “uncertainty and affliction” and more their deliverance, under Elizabeth, and new optimism as ex-refugees turned returnees rejoining “the Promised Land, across the sea”?³⁷

A list of Bible books follows. Unlike today’s Protestant Bibles, this inaugural Reformed Bible in English (like parallel Bibles in other languages) includes the thirteen Apocrypha between the Testaments, preceded by a very brief argument explaining that, while these books lack the canonical status of the others and are not “red [read] and expounded publikely in the Church,” nevertheless they “were receiued to be red for the aduancement and furtherance of the knowledge of the historie, & for the instruction of godlie maners.”³⁸ Like every fully canonical book, each apocryphon has a short

more thorough reform of the English Church was a matter of concern”; see Naseeb Shaheen, “Misconceptions about the Geneva Bible,” *Studies in Bibliography* 37 (1984): 156–58.

³³ Norton, “English Bibles,” 316. The French Psalter was versified by Clément Marot and Theodore Beza and set to music.

³⁴ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 291.

³⁵ For a 1560 copy digitized by the Bibliothèque de Genève, see *La Bible, qui est toute la Sainte Escriture, contenant le Vieux Testament et le Nouveau, avec les figures & leurs descriptions (etc.)*, https://www.e-rara.ch/gep_g/content/zoom/10687373. Its composition is strikingly similar.

³⁶ Per the title-page of the copy in the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, *The bible and holy scriptures conteyned in the olde and newe testament. translated according to the ebrue and greke, and conferred with the best translations in diuers langages (etc.)* (Geneva, 1560), <https://www.proquest.com/books/bible-holy-scriptures-conteyned-olde-newe/docview/2240910134/se-2C>.

³⁷ See Fulton, *Book of Books*, 119–20.

³⁸ Huntington Library copy, “Apocrypha, the Argument,” 403.

chapter summary, but marginal notes per page typically number none or just one.³⁹

Next, an Epistle addresses “the moste vertuous and noble Quene Elisabet,” then in the second year of her reign. Select Scriptures offer Elizabeth scriptural analogies from godly rulers like Jehoshaphat, Josiah, and Hezekiah, who promoted and protected the Old Testament people of God:

These excellent Kings did not onely imbrace the worde promptly and ioyfully, but also procured earnestly and commanded the same to be taught, preached and maynteyned through all their countreys and dominions.⁴⁰

England is here viewed through the lens of Israel, with Elizabeth the godly monarch charged before God, like a Josiah, with rebuilding the church in her realm: believers look to her for “some wonderful worke by your grace to the vniuersal comfort of his Churche.”⁴¹ First from enforced exile, then as repatriated exiles (after Bloody Mary’s death and Elizabeth’s accession), the translators and commentators of the Geneva Bible hoped to edify that Protestant church on English and Scottish soil through “the building of the Lords Temple, the house of God, the Church of Christ.”⁴²

Moving from the queen to her subjects, a first-person-plural General Preface to the reader, dated April 10, 1560, then addresses the believers of the British Isles. The reason for this Bible’s dispatch is explained toward the end: it is “sent from God to the people of God, for the increase of his kingdome, the comfort of his Churche, and discharge of our conscience.” Providential circumstances of production are highlighted: its writers are “translating ... the holy Scriptures into our natiue tongue,” in a situation described as “this ripe age and cleare light,” exhorted by those “whose learning and godlynes we reuerence.” Their challenging task entails confronting “the tyme ... moste dangerous and the persecution sharpe and furious”—still a reference to recent Marian oppression rather than to Elizabethan liberation.

As part of a “suite of interpretive aids,”⁴³ the preface introduces three further helps for readers; first, maps and other illustrations, which I discuss

³⁹ Fulton, *Book of Books*, 304.

⁴⁰ Huntington Library copy, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴³ Justine Walden, “Global Calvinism: The Maps in the English Geneva Bible,” in *Shaping the Bible in the Reformation: Books, Scholars and Their Readers in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Matthew McLean (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 193.

in detail elsewhere;⁴⁴ second, a comprehensive table of Hebrew names that aims “to restore the names to their integritie” by helping contemporary believers derive encouragement for faith from Scripture’s godly exemplars; and third, a three-column, eighteen-page table of principal Bible topics, “conteyning all the chefe [chief] and principal matters of the whole Bible,” which greatly expands the one from the 1557 New Testament, this time in light of all Scripture, “so that nothing (as we trust) that any colde [could] iustely desire, is omitted.” The 1560 Bible also reproduces all invaluable arguments first provided for New Testament books in 1557.⁴⁵ Here, in truth, is a Bible “packed with diagrams, charts, prefaces and printed marginal notes designed to guide and facilitate the reading of the scriptures.”⁴⁶

The 1560 Bible’s abundant offer to the reader becomes immediately apparent in the text and apparatus of the opening page, Genesis 1 (see Figure 3).

Like the 1553 French Bible, the text occupies two columns per page; as a corollary, a page header—here, “the creation of the worlde”—can now headline essential happenings in the text or discussed in accompanying notes. Each double-page spread is also consecutively numbered.⁴⁷ After an introductory argument—an aid absent from French Bibles—a chapter summary highlights key verses and their content: there is less detail than in the 1553 French Bible but more than its 1560 French successor (as also for the notes). Wherever the English text paraphrases the original, a corresponding note supplies a more literal rendering (and vice versa).⁴⁸ By comparison with the 1557 Geneva New Testament, the 1560 Bible’s consecutively lettered marginal notes—all keyed to their respective column of text—now form an almost continuous scaffolding. The annotated Matthew Bible of 1537 had fallen afoul of Henry VIII’s 1538 ban on annotated books; correspondingly, the 1539 Great Bible made available for use in worship in churches or for broader consultation had none. Thus, the 1560 Bible’s fulsome and uncensored marginal apparatus both created and satisfied a demand for interpretative guidance to help with understanding ancient Scripture and applying it “in the early modern present.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ See my “The Geneva Bible’s Expansion.”

⁴⁵ See Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 282–83.

⁴⁶ Thus Molekamp, “Using a Collection,” art. 10, section 1. Molekamp had access to nearly three quarters of all complete Geneva Bible editions published in England between 1575 and 1644; evidence left by their original owners and users—such as underlining or ringing of text, or written comments—points to acts of reading that they occasioned.

⁴⁷ Here “1” (p. 1).

⁴⁸ Norton, “English Bibles,” 318: “Either way,” he says, “the reader could feel that he had both the words and the meaning.”

⁴⁹ Fulton, *Book of Books*, 114.

An appendix of Hebrew proper names and an alphabetical topical concordance (mentioned earlier) follow Revelation, as does the calculation of time from Adam to Christ—updated by three years to 1560. A further timeline of the life of the Apostle Paul comes next, calculated from Acts 9 onward and correlated with the reigns of the relevant Roman emperors; running from 35 to 70 CE, from Paul’s conversion to his execution, it includes dates for the penning of his Epistles.

Four assorted helps for worship complete the 1560 Bible. First, Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins’ Psalter: each Psalm is in meter and instructions for use, on the title page, envisage both ecclesial and private settings, with the latter of some interest in our day, after a century of popular music:

... in private houses, for their godly solace and comfort, laying apart all ungodly songs and ballads, which tend onely to the nourishing of vice, and corrupting of youth.

Twenty-three assorted texts for further use in household worship follow: beginning with the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, they include, for instance, the *Magnificat* or *Benedictus* from Luke’s Gospel, the Ten Commandments, a Creed in meter, and various prayers. The third aid is a “forme of prayer to be used in priuate houses euery Morning and Euening.” Finally, two short indexes respectively key the opening words of each metrical Psalm to its psalm number (and to the relevant page) and align the twenty-three liturgical texts for use after the Psalms.

III. *The 1576 Tomson New Testament*

Briefer comments will suffice for the revised New Testament⁵⁰ by public servant Laurence Tomson, secretary to Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth I’s principal secretary from 1573 until his death in 1590. Without being “an outspoken defender of puritanism and presbyterianism,”⁵¹ Tomson maintained Reformed views and Puritan churchmanship or associations throughout his life. The front-matter includes a table of New

⁵⁰ Reference is to *The New Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ translated out of Greeke by Theod. Beza: Whereunto are adioyned brief Summaries of doctrine vpon the Euangelistes and Actes of the Apostles, together with the methode of the Epistles of the Apostles by the said Theod. Beza: (etc) ... Englished by L. Tomson* (London 1576); digitized copy in the Bodleian Library, <https://www.proquest.com/books/nevv-testament-our-lord-iesus-christ-translated/docview/2240909980/se-2?accountid=200462>.

⁵¹ Irena Backus, “Laurence Tomson (1539–1608) and Elizabethan Puritanism,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 28.1 (1977): 27.

Testament books; Tomson's Epistle to Walsingham and Francis Hastings; a translation of Beza's long epistle to Prince Louis de Bourbon; "The printer to the diligent reader," where Tomson briefly presents the numbered notes, drawn principally from those in Beza's 1565 Latin Version,⁵² and interspersed italicized lettered notes of his own, explaining in paragraph three how the alphabetical notes "expound and enlighten the darke words and phrases" of the Scripture text; and a map of the Holy Land with legend. Like its 1557 predecessor, Tomson's New Testament text is a single column, with chapter summaries (their content now keyed to relevant verses) and marginal notes (now only in the outer margins, sometimes running on between portions of text).

From 1579 onwards, the Scottish printers Alexander Arbuthnot and Thomas Bassandyne combined Tomson's New Testament with the remainder of the 1561 second-edition Geneva Bible (although often omitting the Apocrypha), with a long preface in Scots: this would become Scotland's Geneva Bible and make the realm "effectively a kingdom of the Geneva Bible" until the late 1620s and 1630s, when the King James New Testament or Bible began displacing it.⁵³ Outside Scotland, the Tomson New Testament went through twenty reprints between 1576 and 1599 and featured in nine whole Bibles from 1587 to 1599.⁵⁴

IV. *The 1599 Geneva-Tomson-Junius Bible*

The text and peritextual elements of this definitive Geneva Bible⁵⁵ from the close of Elizabeth I's reign mostly come from earlier versions and require concise treatment only. The title page is followed by an Epistle to the Reader and a prayer in verse that speaks "of the incomparable treasure of the holy Scriptures." A one-page diagram entitled "How to take profite in reading of the holy Scriptures" points users to prayerful reading or to relevant sermons and commentaries available elsewhere that further expound the text. Last is a table of Bible books, Apocrypha included.

⁵² For Crawford Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology, 1550–1682* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000), 70, Beza's notes "were designed to educate their readers into Calvinism and supply them with answers to challenges to it."

⁵³ Norton, "English Bibles," 319. Scots preface aside, Scotland's Geneva Bible in English had the unforeseen consequence English becoming "the language of print in Scotland": Dawson, "Scotland," 65.

⁵⁴ See Lewis Lupton, *Joy: A History of the Geneva Bible*, vol. 7 (London: Olive Tree, 1975), 163–64. Martin, "Geneva Bible", 47, gives 1616 as the final publication date for a Tomson edition.

⁵⁵ Reference is to a copy (see Figure 4) in the Gamble Library, Union Theological College, Belfast.

Marginal notes for Revelation principally set this 1599 Bible apart from its 1560 predecessor, providing very detailed commentary from the Heidelberg theologian Franciscus Junius (see Figure 4).⁵⁶

Interspersed with Beza's short notes, in italics, is Junius's copious material, destined to be "extraordinarily influential": from these Bible margins, his interpretation would exert "a tremendous influence on biblical interpretation in England and its American colonies for generations."⁵⁷

After Revelation, two familiar 1560 tables recur: the proper names appendix and topical concordance. Sternhold and Hopkins's Psalter is now bracketed at the start by a dozen or so hymns (from the *Veni Creator* to *The Complaint of a Sinner*) and at the end by settings of the Lord's Prayer or the Creed and other liturgical items, with melodies in musical notation provided for each Psalm in meter or other text in verse.

V. Readers and Reading

Having surveyed how Geneva Bibles provided support for readers, we may further interrogate those readers' reading experience or circumstances.

In the early modern period, affairs of church and state were so inextricable as to impinge jointly on all Bible translation or commentary. From the 1520s to the 1540s, while Henry VIII reigned, not just translation itself but even purchase or ownership of an English Bible were deemed seditious: for having broken this ban, William Tyndale paid with his life in 1536. Under Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer's influence, Henry was temporarily persuaded that translating the Bible into English could help consolidate his leadership of an English Church that had broken with Rome, and the Great Bible of 1539 was the tangible result: but it was not meant for private readers, and the 1543 Act for the Advancement of True Religion outlawed other translations and kept the Bible out of the hands of ordinary readers.

By contrast, the new democratization of access to Scripture was the Geneva Bible's very intention, and ordinary readers were its target audience. If "there are no politically innocent texts" and "no politically neutral marginalia" either,⁵⁸ precise ecclesial or political categorization of the

⁵⁶ Or François du Jon, to give this Heidelberg exile his French Huguenot name. For much more on Junius, his notes, and Revelation commentary, see my "The Geneva Bible's Expansion."

⁵⁷ Patrick J. O'Banion, "The Pastoral Use of the Book of Revelation in Late Tudor England," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57.4 (2006): 706, 709.

⁵⁸ William Slights, "'Marginall Notes that Spoile the Text': Scriptural Annotation in the English Renaissance," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 55 (1992): 258.

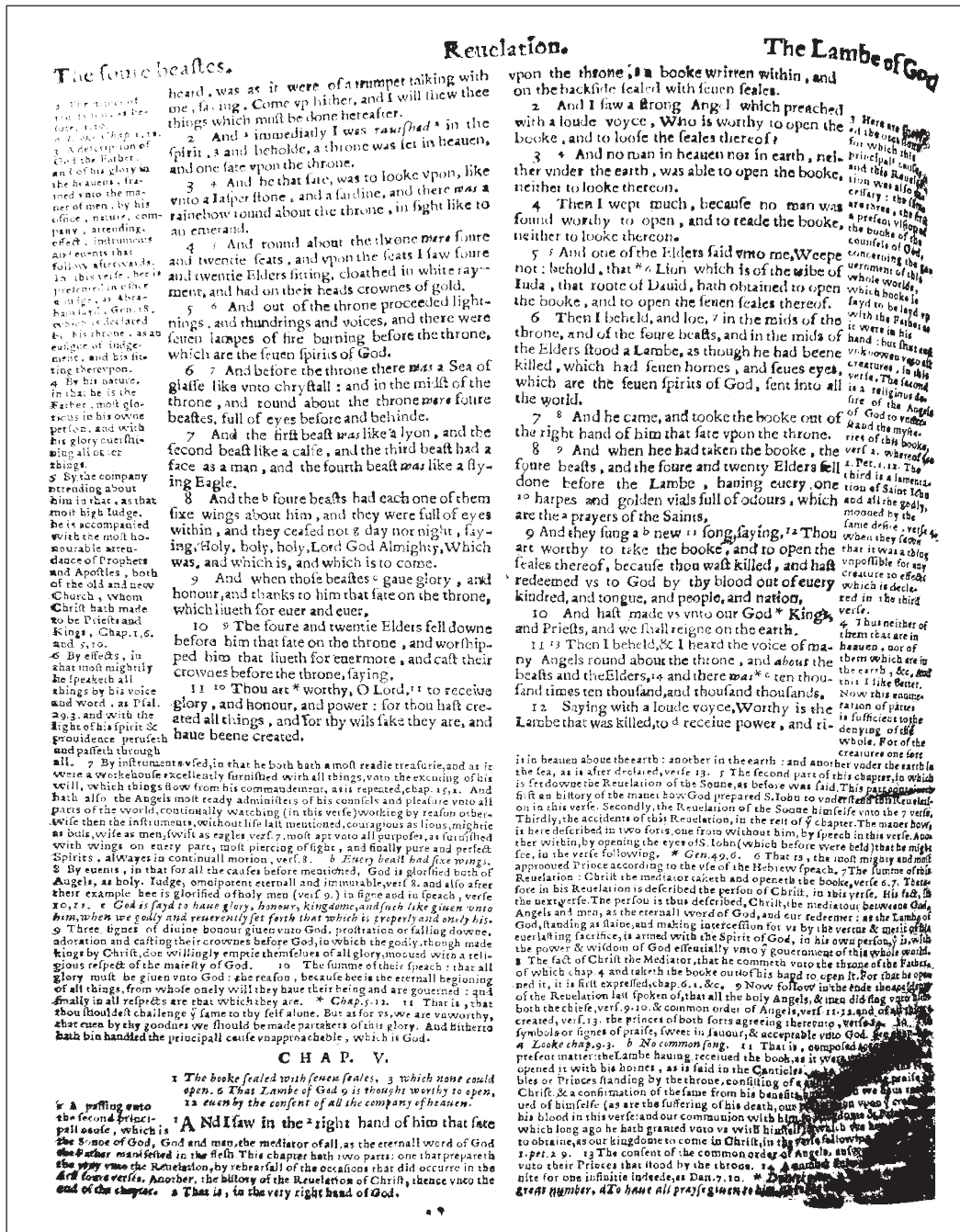


Figure 4. 1599 Geneva Bible, with text and full apparatus for Revelation 4:1b-5:12.

Geneva notes remains elusive: might the 1557 Genevan text or the critical apparatus that frames it “be seen as offering a revolutionary solution to the crisis of the Marian regime”? Do the helps in the various Geneva Bibles somehow connect subsequent readers “to later political crises such as the English Civil War”?⁵⁹ Undoubtedly, some of the exiles’ publications—like John Ponet’s *A Short Treatise of Politike Power* (1556) or Christopher Goodman’s *How Superior Powers Oght to Be Obeyd of Their Subjects* (1558)—are resistance literature, expressing revolutionary ideas about “the right and duty to overthrow idolatrous tyrants”⁶⁰ and paralleling the tribulations of the people of England with those of Israel in the Old Testament. Yet overall, comment on idolatry or tyrannical rulers in the Geneva Bible notes is both more nuanced, and less prevalent, than is often claimed.⁶¹

For successive Genevan editions, guidance on “the spiritual life of the reader” represents the bottom line,⁶² with the relational context of the household, rather than solitary private reading, as we might spontaneously think today, everywhere assumed and facilitated.⁶³ Nonetheless, aids to reading, as itemized above, suggest a range of reading experiences on offer. Whereas shared habits characterized early modern readers, such as how they “loved to mark Bibles,”⁶⁴ available evidence does suggest an “ineluctable specificity of readers and readings”⁶⁵ and requires recognition of a certain diversity. Publishers of any given edition sought to build and nurture a particular readership, providing appropriate prefatory material or elements of apparatus with a tailored rhetorical appeal.⁶⁶ Geneva Bibles were printed in two typefaces: roman type (described above) and commonly, in England, stylized and decorative black-letter (or Gothic) type. The former attracted

⁵⁹ See Tom Furniss, “Reading the Geneva Bible: Notes Toward an English Revolution,” *Prose Studies* 31 (2009): 3.

⁶⁰ Furniss, 4, referencing Gerry Bowler, “Marian Protestants and the Idea of Violent Resistance to Tyranny,” in *Protestantism and the National Church in Sixteenth Century England*, ed. Peter Lake and Maria Dowling (London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1988), 124–43. For social matters or the social order, addressed in the notes, see Richard L. Greaves, “Tradition-alism and the Seeds of Revolution in the Social Principles of the Geneva Bible,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 7.1 (1976): 94–109.

⁶¹ See Fulton, *Book of Books*, 127–29, who remains well aware that the notes reveal “a religio-political lexicon for Tudor culture”.

⁶² Molekamp, “Using a Collection,” 9.

⁶³ Sasha Roberts, “Reading in Early Modern England,” *Critical Survey* 12 (2000): 5.

⁶⁴ Thus Thomas Fulton and Jeremy Specland, “The Elizabethan Catholic New Testament and Its Readers,” *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 6.2 (2019): 251.

⁶⁵ Richard Calis and Arnoud Visser, “Building a Digital Bookwheel Together: Annotated Books Online and the History of Early Modern Reading Practices,” *Bibliothecae.it* 3 (2014): 65, quoting William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), xv.

⁶⁶ Roberts, “Reading,” 2, 8.

the well educated, while the latter targeted a less-schooled readership. Distinct reading aids were designed for each, with three helps appearing only in black-letter editions: “Certaine questions and answeres touching the doctrine of Predestination,” “The summe of the whole Scripture of the bookes of the olde and Newe Testament,” and a “Glossary of strange names.” Intended to be “more discursive and instructive” than aids provided by roman printings,⁶⁷ they may reflect the needs of aural readers like children or household servants, as well as the literate. By contrast, Bibles in roman type presupposed a firmer educational and theological basis and might include short calendrical elements, drawn from contemporary almanacs, or propose “a full arsenal of cosmological, historical as well as instructive paratexts.”⁶⁸ Whatever the specific aids in individual Geneva Bibles, arguably in each case, “the text could not carry the argument fully without the paratext.”⁶⁹

Conclusion

By the time the printing of Geneva Bibles in Britain was outlawed (1616), in tandem with publication and promotion of its replacement, the 1611 King James Bible, successive Geneva Bibles had aroused and assuaged popular hunger for a Bible with extensive interpretative aids, fostering readers’ biblical literacy and a living faith for working out in everyday contexts. When importation of Geneva Bibles printed abroad also became illegal in 1630, minimal marginal helps gracing the King James Bible—as preferred by the sponsoring monarch, James I, or the English bishops—simply could not satisfy ministers’, believers’, and citizens’ taste for theological aids to reading and responding, an appetite that Geneva Bibles had both created and long catered to. By 1640, “the reading public, both clergy and lay, were understood as desiring an up-to-date annotated Bible,”⁷⁰ and a newly glossed King James Bible duly appeared in 1645: with appropriate revisions, its apparatus was—unsurprisingly—predominantly Genevan-inspired,⁷¹ in retrospective tribute to its forerunner.

⁶⁷ Molekamp, “Using a Collection,” 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁶⁹ Fulton and Specland, “Elizabethan Catholic,” 254.

⁷⁰ Richard A. Muller, “An Entire Commentary..., the Like Never Before Published in English,” in Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship. Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 14.

⁷¹ Muller, “An Entire Commentary,” 15. For around thirty years, and as an interim solution, printers mindful of customer preferences had sporadically produced hybrid King James Bibles with Geneva annotations added.