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Question 86 - What are the facts regarding the Geneva Bible?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

86. What are the facts regarding the Geneva Bible?

- A. During the vicious Protestant persecution under Bloody Mary, many Reformers fled to Geneva, Switzerland, and enjoyed the protection of Geneva's great leader John Calvin. It was here that Calvin's brother-in-law, William Whittingham, translated the Scriptures into the Geneva Bible. The text of the Geneva Bible was based on that of the Great Bible.
- B. The New Testament appeared in 1557, and was probably the product of one man, William Whittingham, an Englishman of great learning, and related to Calvin by marriage. It was a revision of Tyndale's, with an Introduction by Calvin. It was the first to use the division of the text into verses. The version of the entire Bible appeared in 1560, the work of English exiled reformers, assisted by Beza, Calvin, and possibly others. The Old Testament was based mainly upon the Great Bible, and the New Testament upon Whittingham's. All were revised from a careful collation of Hebrew and Greek originals, with the use of Latin versions, especially Beza's, and the standard French and German versions. It was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth "in bold and simple language, without flattery or reserve." It used the verse divisions and italics, and was the first to omit the Apocrypha. The type was changed from the black letter to the simple Roman type, and the book was small and handy. The explanatory notes were concise and sensible, somewhat Calvinistic in creed and government, but without controversial bitterness. There were other valuable helps. It was issued as late as 1644, and ran through more than 160 editions.

(General Biblical Introduction. H. S. Miller. Word-Bearer Press. Houghton, N.Y. 1952. p. 353)

- C. Bible of the Geneva Exiles – When Mary Tudor became queen of England in 1553, she was determined to roll back the Reformation and reinstate Catholicism in her country. She wed the Catholic Philip of Spain and induced Parliament to recognize papal authority. The persecution of Protestants followed and, with it, a rush of exiles to Geneva, where work on the Geneva Bible commenced.

The Geneva translators produced a revised New Testament in English in 1557 that was essentially a revision of Tyndale's 1534 edition, with changes based on the Latin translation executed by the French theologian Theodore Beza. Much of the work was done by William Whittingham, brother-in-law of John Calvin, the French theologian and reformer who stressed the doctrine of predestination.

The Geneva New Testament was barely off the press when work began on a revision of the entire Bible, a process that took more than two years. Whittingham

again acted as translator and probably had the assistance of two fellow exiles, Anthony Gilby and Thomas Sampson. The New Testament was a revision of Whittingham's 1557 version, with greater attention paid to Beza's work and the Greek text. The Old Testament drew on the Great Bible edition of 1550, altering it in light of available Hebrew and Latin texts and of a French version being prepared in Geneva at the same time. The translators strove to give their translation a Hebrew flavor and so, as they noted, "reserved the Hebrew phrases notwithstanding that they may seem somewhat hard in their ears that are not well practised."

The first edition of the Geneva Bible, published in that city in 1560, was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I. Crowned in 1558, Elizabeth once again turned England in a Protestant direction.

The Geneva Bible was instantly popular. At least 140 editions were printed, and for 40 years after the King James Version was published, the Geneva continued to be the Bible of the home. In 1643 extracts from it were printed in the *Soldier's Pocket Bible* issued to the army of the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell.

Many of the commentaries written in the margin of the Geneva Bible expressed general Protestant beliefs, such as justification by faith alone. Some, like the commentary on Psalm 147:2, imparted Calvinist teachings on subjects such as predestination: "God's just judgment . . . appointed the reprobate to eternal damnation." The commentaries also offered alternative translations. Some of the later editions included strongly worded condemnations of the Roman Catholic Church. One note went so far as to identify the pope as the Book of Revelation's "beast that cometh out of the bottomless pit [Rev. 11:7]."

(*The Bible Through the Ages*. Reader's Digest. Pleasantville, N.Y. 1996, pp. 312, 314)