

Sunday, January 10, 2021—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 131 The Complete Geneva Bible: The Old Testament, Part 3

### **Introduction**

- Last week in Lesson 129 we continued our study of the complete 1560 Geneva Bible by looking at the Old Testament.
- Please recall that the Geneva Bible set forth English renderings of the Hebrew text for Ezra through Malachi for the first time. Prior to 1560, William Tyndale had translated the Pentateuch (1530), Historical books from Joshua to II Chronicles, and Jonah from Hebrew into English before his death in 1536. John Rogers printed all of Tyndale’s Hebrew renderings for the first time in his 1537 Matthew’s Bible. This of course means that Miles Coverdale did not translate from Hebrew into English in his 1535 Bible or the 1539 Great Bible in which he edited Rogers work from 1537.
- This morning we want to continue looking at the Geneva Old Testament by considering a few more of its important features.

### **The Old Testament**

- The Geneva translators seemed to know and/or anticipate that much of the English-speaking world would need help understanding the intricacies of the Hebrew text. Consequently, they commented extensively on the text in the margins of the Old Testament. Dr. David Daniell states the following regarding the Old Testament marginal notations in his book *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*:
  - “It is more important to note that, like the misguided Bishops’ Bible translators, the KJV translators’ denial of marginal notes removed at a stroke that essential element of understanding Hebrew, the openness to engagement, the in-and-out movement between literal sense and meaning, the many kinds of explanations, which the Geneva annotators so constantly used. Often the best that King James’s workers could do was to lift ‘the literal Hebrew phrase from Geneva’s margin into its own text.’” (Daniell, 297)
- According to Dr. Daniell, Gerald Hammond’s “fifty pages of examination of the Geneva translators at work with the Hebrew remain the best introduction to the subject.” (Daniell, 297) Professor Daniell is of course referring to Gerald Hammond’s groundbreaking 1982 publication *The Making of the English Bible*. It is to the work of Hammond that we will now turn our attention.
- Hammond’s discussion of the Geneva Bible is long and detailed spanning fifty pages of text. On page 94 Hammond begins a discussion of how the Geneva Bible handled the translation of Hebrew words and phrases into English. This topic was addressed by the translators in the Preface to the Geneva Bible.

- “The preface to the Bible makes the purpose of one kind of note very clear. It speaks of the translators’ attempts to keep to the ‘Hebrew phrases, notwithstanding that they may seem somewhat hard in their ears that are not well practiced and also delight in the sweet sounding phrases of the Holy Scriptures’. Those who are ‘not well practiced’ clearly meant the majority of the people—the Geneva Bible was to be the first readily accessible Bible produced in England. For those people—either the ‘simple’ who may be easily dismayed by the unfamiliarity of the Hebrew phrase, or the malicious who might use it as a stick to beat the translation with—‘we have in the margin noted that diversity of speech or reading which may also seem agreeable to the mind of the Holy Ghost and proper for our language.’

The preface goes on to describe other things in the notes and text which are for the reader’s aid. Those places where it is almost impossible to keep the Hebrew phrase have a literal translation of the Hebrew in the margin; and wherever interpolation has had to be made, these are signaled by italicization. . .

The simplest of the marginal notes, those with no other explanation, give the literal meaning of the Hebrew or Greek original. We do not have to go very far into the Bible to see that the preface’s claim is a little disingenuous. From there we might well have assumed that the Hebrew phrase was everywhere retained except when the English translation simply could not contain it. But it soon becomes apparent that that margin is being used to convey the literal meaning of phrases which could easily have been absorbed into the body of the translation. In Genesis 1:20 the Geneva text reads:

Afterward God said, Let the waters bring forth in abundance *every* creeping thing that hath life: and let the fowl fly upon the earth in the open firmament of the heaven.

Both ‘life’ and ‘open firmament’ are signalled, and in the margin we find their literal meanings, respectively ‘the soul of life’ and ‘face of the firmament’. Neither of these seems to be a particularly obscure phrase, or one which could not fit into Geneva’s rendering. . .

These marginal alternative readings give an invaluable insight into the translation policies of the Geneva translators. At one extreme we can sense the relinquished possibility of a truly literal translation. While the majority of the notes give the more Hebraic form, a significant minority do the opposite: the note gives the natural English version, or explanation, or the Hebraic phrase in the text. In Genesis 6:13, for example, the Geneva text has God saying to Noah, ‘An end of all flesh is come before me’. The note in the margin explains this statement: ‘Or, I will destroy mankind’. It is a curiously flat alternative, generally unnecessary because the literal rendering of the Hebrew in the body of the Geneva text can hardly be misunderstood, and it seems to reflect the translators’ uneasiness about importing so alien-sounding a phrase into their version. In Genesis 16:6

Abram tells his wife that she has control over her maidservant. Geneva gives the Hebrew idiom literally: ‘Behold, thy maid is in thine hand’—and lest there be any misunderstanding adds the note ‘or, power’, to explain that Hagar is not literally in Sarah’s hands at that moment. In Genesis 31:40 Jacob is in full rhetorical cry in his protests to Laban about the way he has been treated; and to emphasise the rhetoric the Geneva Bible gives his comments literally: ‘I was in the day consumed with heat, and with frost in the night, and my sleep departed from mine eyes.’ The note to the final part of this verse reads ‘or, I sleep not’; again, the only reason for its presence is to help make more acceptable the alien phraseology of the text—it adds nothing to the meaning, nor does it make anything clearer.” (Hammond, 94-97)

- Later in the chapter, Hammond notes occurrences of the opposite phenomena where the margin is used by the Geneva translators to carry the Hebrew idiom.
  - “Most telling is where the Geneva translators used the margin to carry a Hebrew idiom while their text contains an English equivalent, for this is a practice directly contrary to their preface’s claim to have ‘reserved the Hebrew phrases’. In Genesis 16:5 they have Sarah complaining to Abram ‘thou dost me wrong’, but the Hebrew idiom . . . literally means, as the note expresses it, ‘mine injury is upon thee’—the Authorized Version has ‘my wrong be upon thee’. In Genesis 24:1 the Geneva text makes a significant alteration to Tyndale’s rendering. Here Abraham is described as, in Tyndale’s words, ‘old and stricken in days’. The Hebrew phrase is . . . , whose literal meaning the Geneva note gets exactly with ‘come into days’. But Geneva’s text has ‘old and stricken in years’. In each of the verses 27 and 28 in Genesis 25 there is an example of the literalism being left to the marginal note. This is how Geneva translates them:

And the boys grew, and Esau *was* a cunning hunter, and lived in the fields; but Jaakob was a plain man, and dwelt in tents. And Izhak loved Esau, for venison *was* his meat, but Rebekah loved Jaakob.

For ‘lived in the fields’ the note gives the literal sense, ‘a man of the field’; and for ‘venison was his meat’ the margin has ‘venison in his mouth’. The second of these is a more understandable preference, for the literal Hebrew would seem very strange to the English reader, but it is difficult to see why the translators felt that ‘man of the field’ was not clear enough. This is how the Authorized Version translates the verses:

And the boys grew, and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.

This kind of contrast between the Geneva Bible and the Authorized Version is a crucial one. Merely because it is called the Geneva Bible, and hence has its roots in Calvinism, there is a tendency to think of it as the most fundamentalist of the English versions—as if it incorporates, for the first time, the Puritans’ obsession with the literal word of God.

Its preface, too, only reinforces such an impression. But this is not the case. Time after time it is possible to see the Authorized Version moving the literal Hebrew phrase from Geneva's margin into its own text. In 1 Samuel 23:16 the Geneva Bible says: 'and Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David into the wood, and comforted him in God'. The note to 'him' is 'Heb. his hand'. By giving a more accurate rendering of the verb—its principal sense is 'strengthen', and not 'comfort'—the Authorized Version gets the literal Hebrew idiom, hand and all, into its rendering: '. . . and strengthened his hand in God'. A little later in the chapter there is a more subtle change. In verse 22 Saul orders his men to search for David. In Geneva's words, they are 'to know and see his place where he haunteth'. But the Hebrew says something quite different, as Geneva's note to 'haunteth' makes clear: 'where his foot hath been'. The Authorized Version is a little more literal, except that it turns Geneva's verb into a noun, thereby reproducing the grammar of the original: 'know and see his place where his haunt is'. And 'haunt' as a translation for a word meaning 'foot' or 'footprint' is suddenly not so radical a departure from the original as was the verb 'haunteth'.

In 1 Samuel 24:4 the Geneva text has Saul going in 'to do his easement', but the Hebrew says, as Geneva's note has it, 'to cover his feet'—i.e. to urinate—and the literal idiom goes straight from Geneva's margin into the Authorized Version's text. This is not a matter of Geneva's greater delicacy, just its fear that the literal sense will not be understood. It is not loath, later in 1 Samuel (25:22) to translate literally: 'for truly I will not leave of all that he hath by the dawning of the day any that pisseth against the wall.' Here the note explains that the final phrase is a 'proverb', meaning that 'he will destroy both small and great'...

In 1 Samuel 25:24 Abigail asks David if she may speak to him, as the Hebrew idiom has it, . . . 'in your ears'. The Geneva Bible avoids the idiom, rendering it like this: 'let thine handmaid speak to thee', with 'in thine ears' left in the marginal note. The Authorized Version tries to find an English equivalent without the unwanted meaning of whispering which a literal rendering would unavoidably carry: 'let thine handmaid . . . speak in thine audience'. Something similar occurs later in the chapter (verse 35) when David tells her that he has heard her voice and has 'granted thy petition'; or that, at least, is the Geneva rendering of the Hebrew phrase. In the margin it gives the literal translation of it, 'received thy face'; and the Authorized Version again finds an English equivalent with some sense of the original idiom: 'I have hearkened to thy voice, and have accepted thy person'. 'Person' here has the sense of 'countenance' or 'face', an idiom going back by way of Coverdale and the Vulgate to the Septuagint.

One final example demonstrates the contrast between Geneva's unwillingness to introduce Hebrew idiom and the Authorized Version's readiness to do so. In Joshua 14:11 Caleb, a man eighty-five years old, claims to be as strong as he was forty years earlier when Moses employed him as one of the Israelite spies. In the Geneva Bible's rendering his claim is a double one, both as a fighting man and a man of peacetime: 'as strong as I was then, so strong I am now, *either* for war, or for government'. But the note

to ‘government’ reveals that the literal meaning of the Hebrew is ‘to go out and come in’. In effect, what the translators have done is what modern translators often feel they have to do, that is to interpret the idiom rather than reproduce it. In the Authorized Version the reader is left to make his own interpretation of what the phrase might mean: ‘as my strength *was* then, even so *is* my strength now, for war, both to go out and come in.’” (Hammond, 100-103)

- In the next category of examples, Hammond is much more positive of how the Geneva translators used the marginal notes to explain the intricacies of the Hebrew text to the English reader.
  - “The desire to interpret is the key to the Geneva translation. So far I have tended to stress its negative implications, but it has positive ones too. The examples I have given have largely shown up the use of its marginal notings of the literal Hebrew to justify an interoperative translation, but in its more discursive notes we can begin to see the basis for its success in gripping the minds of four generations of English readers. Most importantly, the marginal note could be used to support pithy or powerfully vague renderings. In Job 9:24, for instance, the briefest note fills out the text. Here the Geneva Bible translates absolutely literally:

The earth is given into the hand of the wicked: he covereth the faces of the judges thereof: if not, where is he? or who is he?

And in the margin, as the note to “where is he?”, is the explanation ‘that can show the contrary?’. For a modern version, intent on avoiding all vagueness, the final phrases are untranslatable, and the New English Bible accordingly leaves them out. In Job 32:21-2 the Hebrew uses the verb *kānāh* twice. The Authorized Version translates it rather windily as ‘give flattering titles to’; Geneva is more pithy:

I will not now accept the person of man, neither will I give titles to man.

For I may not give titles, *lest* my Maker should take me away suddenly.

The note to ‘titles’ justifies the pithiness by explaining, ‘the Hebrew word signifieth to change the name, as to call a fool a wise man: meaning that he would not cloak the truth to flatter men’. A fine example occurs in Ruth 4:1, where the Hebrew uses the phrase..., roughly equivalent to the English ‘so and so’. Geneva translates it tersely, ‘Ho, such one, come, sit down here’, adding in the margin: ‘the Hebrews here use two words which have no proper signification, but seem to note a certain person, as we say, Ho sirra, or ho, such a one.’

Occasionally the scholarship of the Geneva translators is used to give more substance to the actual Hebrew text. In 1 Samuel 7:6, for example, they translate the Hebrew accurately: ‘And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord. . .’. Then, in the margin, they give the reader the explanation of the

Aramaic paraphrase, the Targum; ‘The Chaldee text hath, that they drew water out of their heart; that is, wept abundantly for their sins.’ The context is that of the repentant Israelites journeying to make battle with the Philistines: the Geneva note sees every action on this journey as having a symbolic force. . .

The Geneva notes, then, could aid a translation which reproduced the ellipses and ambiguities of the original. This help is most effective in passages of biblical poetry, as we shall see shortly, but it also works in narrative contexts. In 1 Kings 21:7 the pure sarcasm of Jezebel’s taunt to her husband over his failure to secure Naboth’s vineyard is perfectly conveyed in the Geneva rendering; ‘Then Jezebel his wife said unto him, Doest thou now govern the Kingdom of Israel?’ And in the margin, for the ‘simpler souls’ who do not see the point of the question, is the explanation: ‘as though she said, Thou knowest not what it is to reign. Command, and entreat not.’ Now look at the New English Bible’s flattening out of the sarcasm in order that its readers may understand the point: “‘Are you or are you not king in Israel,’ said Jezebel.’

. . . These notes, constantly explaining and interpreting, have a significant effect upon the nature of the translation. Because the translators could always use them to clear up ambiguities, explain obscurities, and fill in ellipses, it meant that the actual translation could afford to retain, to a great degree, the ambiguities, obscurities, and ellipses of the original. While the margin is specific and discursive, the text can stand as an evocatively simple rendering of the Hebrew images and metaphors.” (Hammond, 103-106)

- To the above comments from the pen of Hammond, I would like to add and conclude with the following from Professor Daniell:
  - “In the Geneva Old Testament there are more notes in the poetic and prophetic books than in the narrative histories and laws. Here the Geneva translators show two advantages, First, the sheer strangeness of Hebrew poetry needs interpretative help if it is to mean anything in English, and they have felt free to use whatever kind of comment is best. Sometimes the literal meaning is in the text, and metaphor is in the margin, and sometimes the other way around—but in both cases the strategy is made clear. Sometimes they use straight glossing; at Isaiah 40:6, ‘All flesh *is* grass, and all the <sup>k</sup>grace thereof is as the flower of the field,’ they note ‘<sup>k</sup> Meaning all man’s wisdom and natural powers, James 1:10, I Peter 1:24.’ The verse in James is ‘Again he that is rich [let him rejoice] in that he is made low: for as the flower of the grass shall he vanish away.’; and that in I Peter, ‘24 For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man is as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower falleth away, 25 But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.’ The latter phrase picks up the words two verses later in the Isaiah chapter. It was, and is, a famous passage, much quoted: but the points should not be lost, that for the Geneva translators Scripture is a vast network of related phrases, particularly connecting the Testaments, and this is wholly right, the New Testament alertness to the Old being rich in every chapter. The KJV panels deserve commendation in their frequent

preservation of Geneva's richness of internal Scriptural reference. (The Geneva translators did not, of course, invent cross-referring; but they developed it.) . . .

The other advantage for their poetic and prophetic books that the Geneva translators took was the division into verses. Paragraphs suited Tyndale's excellent understanding of Hebrew narrative drive. Hebrew poetry works differently. Consider the opening of Job chapter 38, approaching the climax of that unique poem:

- Then answered the Lord unto Job out of the whirlwind, and said,
- 2) Who is this that darkeneth the counsel by words without knowledge?
  - 3) Gird up now thy loins like a man: I will demand of thee & declare thou unto me.
  - 4) Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding,
  - 5) Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest, or who hath stretched the line over it:
  - 6) Whereupon are the foundations thereof set: or who laid the cornerstone thereof:
  - 7) When the stars of the morning praised *me* together, and all the children of God rejoiced.

The complex and cumulative imagery, and above all the parallelisms, are more than weakened if this is printed as a paragraph. Moreover, this is God taking breath, as it were, to go on about his Creation for four long chapters, a total of 126 splendid verses. The immediate establishment of a rhythmic base is essential. The KJV panels understood this, and took over the first six verses unchanged, apart from changing 'set' in verse 6 to 'fastened.' What they did change, however, in verse 7, produced pure magic: 'When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?' The Geneva margin notes their own version of the latter phrase, 'the Children of God', 'Meaning, the Angels.'" (Daniell, 298-299)

### Works Cited

- Daniell, David. *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Hammond, Gerald. *The Making of the English Bible*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1983.